Wireframe

LIFTING THE LID ON VIDEO GAMES

2022's
MOST ANTICIPATED INDIE GAMES

DESIGNING
DIGITAL CARD GAMES

THE RISE OF
SERENE SKATING SIMS
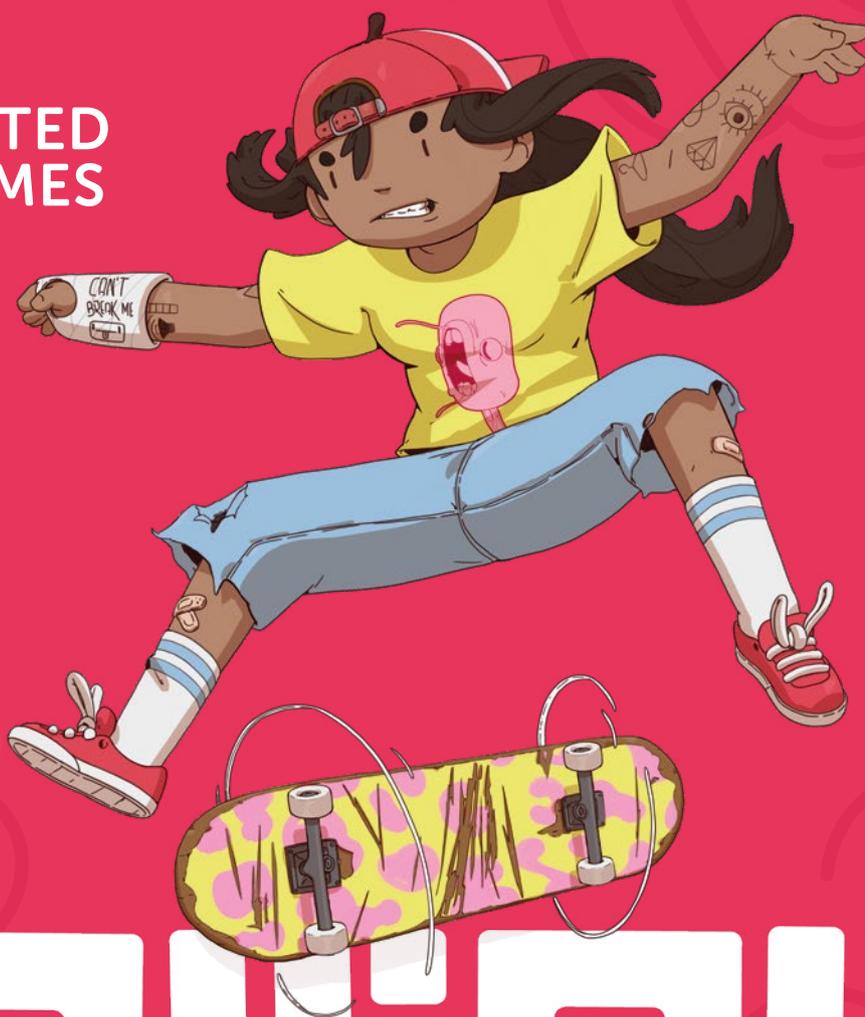
OlliOlli
WORLD

The hit skateboarding series is going global

Game history needs to be preserved and made accessible to all

Emulation is a dirty word in the games industry, with Nintendo annihilating ROM download sites with zeal. Elsewhere, Apple merrily booted iDOS off the App Store for having the audacity to provide file system access. Meanwhile, many games are at risk of extinction on a daily basis. But who saves them? Historically, pirates: ancient classics have been preserved for all time in digital form by people who made illicit copies of the kind that would make a Nintendo lawyer itch.

The industry's lack of broad interest in and respect for gaming's past is driven by it being young, profitable, and always about the next big thing. Gamers have been trained to believe in tech evolution above all else and to ditch gaming's history as detritus. Even this is nothing new: I recall during the mid-1980s seminal C64 magazine Zzap!64 casually dismissed excellent games that just happened to be conversions of two-year-old arcade titles. But the reality is old games do matter: they show where the industry came from, can help us learn, and can be superb fun in their own right.

Compare gaming's situation to the music industry's. How absurd it would be if any recording more than a decade old was inaccessible to the average punter, bar a few choice cuts Nintenmusic deigned to sell you remastered versions of again and again. It was therefore great to hear Phil Spencer, Microsoft's vice president of gaming, suggest the industry work towards keeping games alive through "legal emulation", noting that many games are locked to devices that are no longer supported, and arguing we should long be able to revisit these past works of art.

The snag: emulation is mainly legal already. The problem is game distribution. Companies ferociously guard old IP, on the basis it's still profitable. Elsewhere, where rights lie isn't clear and can be

CRAIG GRANNELL

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fragmented – for example, Numskull recently had to halt development of a *Track & Field* Quarter Arcade on discovering the cabinet artwork rights were held by the original creator rather than Konami. So it's tricky. Even so, you'll find entities doing their best to preserve what came before. World of Spectrum has long attempted to secure legal permission for hosted game files. GameClub ambitiously rescues mobile games from oblivion (while Apple and Google have no interest in doing so). Blaze reissues licensed old games as collectable carts for its own Evercade hardware.

But these efforts are a drop in the ocean – and only World of Spectrum's is genuinely open. Moreover, none compare to the success of illegal actions, or legally dubious ones such as the growing collection of ROMs over at Internet Archive. Yet if nothing changes, it will be pirates and nonconformists that future generations thank for letting them explore gaming's past. It's they who will have kept countless games alive, rather than the wider industry itself – and that's an absurd position for the games industry to find itself in.

On Twitter, GamesBeat's Jeff Grubb (**@JeffGrubb**) responded to Spencer's remarks by reiterating that emulators are legal, adding: "The thing we're talking about here is getting companies in line to accept emulation as a natural end point for their copyrighted software". That is a reasonable goal and likely wouldn't impact on balance sheets either, even for companies making money from old games. Emulation has friction. Many folks happily splash out on a zero-fuss re-release of an old favourite, not least if the package is pretty – witness the success of Nintendo's Game & Watch: Super Mario Bros. But this stance would positively impact on gaming as a whole, provide widespread access to the industry's past to those who want it, and stop many games from disappearing forever. ⓦ

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WELCOME

It's January, which means it's time for a customary look ahead to the year's most exciting games – you can see our pick on page 26. If you're into that sort of thing, though, January's also the month when you start setting the odd New Year's resolution – and if you've been thinking about making a game of your own for years, but keep putting it off, then take a look at our profile of British indie developer Runner Duck on page 76.

Just a few years ago, its co-founders, David Miller and Jon Wingrove, were thoroughly miserable: stuck making free-to-play mobile games that had their sights set on wringing money out of their players at every turn. Disillusioned, Miller and Wingrove started spending their evenings making their debut game, *Bomber Crew*; when it launched in 2017, the hectic management sim was an indie hit, taking the number one spot on Steam.

Bomber Crew put Runner Duck well and truly on the map, and they've since released a second game, *Space Crew*, as well as a free *Legendary Edition* expansion, released last October. So there we have it: if you've been on the fence about making a game of your own, now's a good time to get started. Not all indie games are hits, but Runner Duck's story proves that life-changing successes really can happen.

Enjoy the new issue!

Ryan Lambie
Editor

BACK TO THE GRIND

Bringing everyone on board in more ways than one: it's **OlliOlli World**

lliOlli World's developer Roll7 wants its game to be accessible. The previous two titles in the series, *OlliOlli* and *OlliOlli2: Welcome to OlliWood*, were exceptionally well-crafted slices of hardcore finger dexterity, requiring timing and reactions to be tip-top in order to skate your way through their lo-fi worlds. Both were excellent games, capable of instilling a sense of Zen-like calm as you ran through another flawless combo… but both were also *difficult* games, where hitting that flawless combo just wasn't something everyone could do, and making a small mistake resulted in the sort of penalising that puts people off continuing to play.

So it's understandable that the UK-based studio wants its third skateboarding game to bring more players into the fold and help us all engage with that 'flow state' we hear so much about. *OlliOlli World* brings more carrot than stick this time around, opting to encourage and reward rather than penalise and deride, all while being just as technical and skilful as before.

But *OlliOlli World* isn't just about bringing more players on board – it's bringing in more character, too. The clue's in the title, as you'd expect, with a whole world of colour and exploration to be uncovered in the game's location, Radlandia – a far cry from the functional-but-lacking-pizazz approach of the first two games.

Players work through a storyline with a fully customisable character, meeting and engaging with plenty of other colourful characters along the way, including new favourite BB Hopper, a business frog.

And, frankly, the game plays really well too. It manages to bring along that sense of skill and mastery from the series' history, while blending in a more welcoming approach – you're slowed down rather than outright failed if you don't quite nail things, for example. High-level players should still be catered for, too, so this genuinely doesn't feel like anything other than a win-win.

With a desire to find out more, we had a chat with Roll7's co-CEO, Tom Hegarty, and creative director, John Ribbins. ➔

CLOSE, BUT...

Another part of the flow of *OlliOlli World* comes thanks to its soundtrack, as Tom Hegarty explains: "A key part of the flow as well has been the music we've added over the years. We've toyed with lots of different styles in *OlliOlli World*, but we always come back to this kind of particular style. 'Swazzy' music, we tend to call it – electronica, chilled. That really adds to the flow; it allows you to get immersed in the game and really feel like it's one cohesive experience."

Which begs the question: no skate punk, then? "We have tried it and yeah, it doesn't work," Hegarty laughs. "Although some people choose their own music, and you can obviously do that. And if that works for you, then all good."

⌄ **You're on a 2D plane, but that doesn't stop the 3D from making itself known at times – especially when switching routes.**

Where did the idea for *OlliOlli World* come from?

JR: After *OlliOlli2*, we were like, 'No more skateboarding games ever, thank you', and then obviously we did *Laser League*. We had a bit of a break, prototypes, lots of ideas – I think we learned an awful lot in the years following *OlliOlli2*. I think we realised, being honest, *OlliOlli* is probably the best game we've ever made and actually, it's very dear to us. And there were a lot of tweets – the tweets going 'When's *OlliOlli 3* happening?' never went away. Over that period of time we learned a lot more, we got a lot better at making video games, and we were able to be a bit more critical of the games we made. [We thought] even though it reviewed well, and people really enjoyed it, if we had another crack at it we could do a much better job making a much more accessible game. Over 2018 especially, I think we all coalesced around this idea that we could make a really good third *OlliOlli*. And it started to grow from there, delving more into the illustrative art style, trying to make the game more welcoming – how we could have this idea of multiple paths in a 2D world, all of those sides [coming] together, and we got really excited about it. Then we had to start running around trying to find a partner for it, because we really, really wanted to make it.

⌃ **Your character is fully customisable, meaning the avatar making its way through this world of sentient cactuses can look as bewildering as you want them to.**

How do you design something to *feel* right? How do you nail that flow state you talk about?

TH: Watching people talk about the first two games, we had some amazing reviews, amazing feedback, people talked about them really fondly. But you had people that went, 'I can't play this game, it's just it's too difficult'. And that was quite sad. So when John talks about making it more approachable, we wanted to kind of remove that skill wall because the people who enjoyed it and got into the flow, which is so important for us, those people were having a great time. [So we wanted] more people to get to that flow. We looked at the edges we needed to smooth, what we could do that [didn't] affect the core gameplay, so people who loved it before still love it. What things we could remove to bring more people in, but keeping that high ceiling of skill and mastery.

JR: Tom says, 'We're gameplay first as a studio', right? The central toy at the core of the game has to be fun... We prototyped all of our games extensively; we've prototyped this game for like, a year. So that initial 'finding the feeling' before you can hide anything behind snazzy graphics or nice VFX or even sound design or animation – just that the very core of it feels good to play. [That's] something we put a lot of time into. With *OlliOlli*, the idea of flow state is that when you're playing well, each action follows intuitively from the last – readability is really a key part of it, right? As you're approaching the next obstacle, it's really obvious what you should do. The approach

^ Mostly colourful and bright it might be, but *OlliOlli World* works smartly with its palette, using... wait, that's a UFO stealing a car, right? O-kay.

that we've had with *OlliOlli World* was to put less emphasis on punishing you when you do something wrong, and putting more emphasis on rewarding you when you do something right, which I think is more conducive to keeping people in a flow state. Even if you're not doing that well, you still feel like you're progressing. And when you start playing how we want you to play, it really starts to reward you visually and with feedback, and you're scoring tons of points.

"WE KEPT THAT HIGH CEILING OF SKILL AND MASTERY"

What's the process of framing it around a narrative been like? Was it straightforward, or has it changed from, say, a gritty war story before pivoting to colours and joy?
JR: Returning from a space war, our haggard protagonist turns to skateboarding to heal... [laughs] One of the early pillars of the game was 'welcoming'. Initially, that was to really frame our approach to how we want people to play the game and how we want them to feel when they pick the

game up. But I think that what's nice is we see that goes out there, and then the team assimilate these things, and it starts to bleed into everything else. So 'welcoming' definitely became part of the tone of the whole game, not just our approach to level design or difficulty.

One of our other pillars was that we wanted the world to feel alive and to have heart. We want it to feel like a real place that people live in, and there are characters to meet and you go on an adventure. But it took a long time to come together. I think the actual world-building has always been consistent, and Radlandia has always been a thing that has grown and developed and gathered flavour and lore as it's gone along. But the actual path you take through it, the actual story of your player journey, did take a while to come together. It's probably the most effort that we've put into building a world and story and characters, so it's been a bit of a learning experience.

You've opted for a more carrot, less stick approach when it comes to difficulty – but how much of a challenge has it been to make it more accessible while maintaining things for high-level players?
TH: That's probably been our biggest gameplay challenge by far... It's the whole idea that we had set up the best way to play *OlliOlli*, in our opinion, [which] was this:
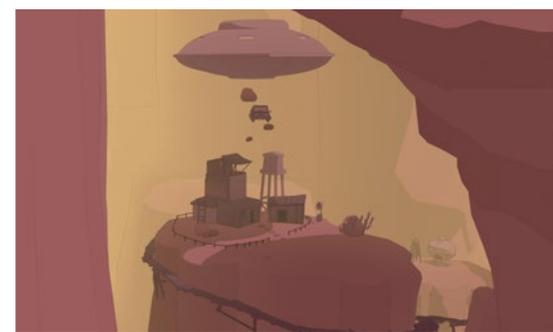
you trick here, you perfect land, you perfect grind. That's how to get the flow. And if you can't do that, we're going to punish you. We've completely flipped that mentality, so now there's this really good flow, you just need to learn to trick and grind – that's all you need to do. If you can do that, you can still experience the flow of the game. And we build up from there. We amped up the reward process as you get better at the game, so if you do want to perfect run, if you want to grind switch, if you want to get your landing timing right, we can up the score, we can up the visual feedback, etc. But start from the basis that the basic gameplay will make you feel good and reward you.

Obviously the visuals change with the move, but are there any other fundamental changes, or reasons, behind the switch to a 3D game? ➔

JR: When you're making a game about skateboarding, the player is going to spin around an awful lot. This is probably the biggest driver. Players are going to spin around *a lot.* If you hand-animate that, you have to draw every single spin of every single flip trick as frames of animation. There was something like 8000 frames of animation in *OlliOlli2*. Plus we wanted to do character customisation; we wanted to let you represent yourself in this game. Those two things don't marry up in hand-animated sprites. Being able to customise my character to be who I want to be, and then also having this really deep bag of tricks that you can do at the same time – that's only possible with 3D... It also really helps us build that wealth that we're creating through

↑ Has anyone else had that dream where two smiling trees wade out through a river towards them? No? Oh.

the lore and narratives that we're writing – one of the things that we'd said early on is we want to make it feel like a world that you skate through, not past, that there's a path going through this space. It's not just like a skate level with a background slapped on it. It really affords us a lot of ability to do that – you can swerve backwards into the scene, we have things in front of the camera, we make it feel like much more of a place.

How did your work on *Not a Hero* and *Laser League* factor into *OlliOlli World*? What did you learn from those projects?
TH: *Laser League* really taught us how to build out that bigger project. Those original games – *OlliOlli*, *OlliOlli2*, *Not a Hero* – were 'proper indie', as in a few people, in a dirty studio, it smells a bit. *Laser League* was almost the next phase of the studio – it was a 20–25-person team. So we had to put in much stronger processes to make sure our production pipelines were working, looking at all our dependencies. That was a really interesting lesson, [and] to be able to apply that to *OlliOlli World* has been really useful. But then interestingly, doing *Laser League* really made us address how we develop as a whole. With *Laser League*, we had a lot of crunch, there was a lot of overtime. We hadn't scoped appropriately. In between *Laser League* and starting prototyping *OlliOlli World*, myself, John, and Simon [Bennett],

the other founder, we went away for a couple of days and really looked at what we wanted to do. We wanted to make sure that the development process was actually fun. That was really important. I mean, lately it's fun, but it's very stressful, it's very busy. We're making video games, you end up making something that should be really enjoyable, so we should enjoy the process.

> ## "THE PLAYER IS GOING TO SPIN AROUND AN AWFUL LOT"

It's still going to be difficult, there's still going to be stresses and strains along the way, but we really changed our whole approach to making sure that we were really enjoying the process. We were still able to be critical of one another in a constructive and nice manner. I know that 'nice' seems like a really weak word, but it's really important. We're all friendly towards each other, and respectful. Those previous development processes have really informed how we've built the whole studio over the last few years, and really fed into *OlliOlli World*. I hope you can see that welcoming attitude
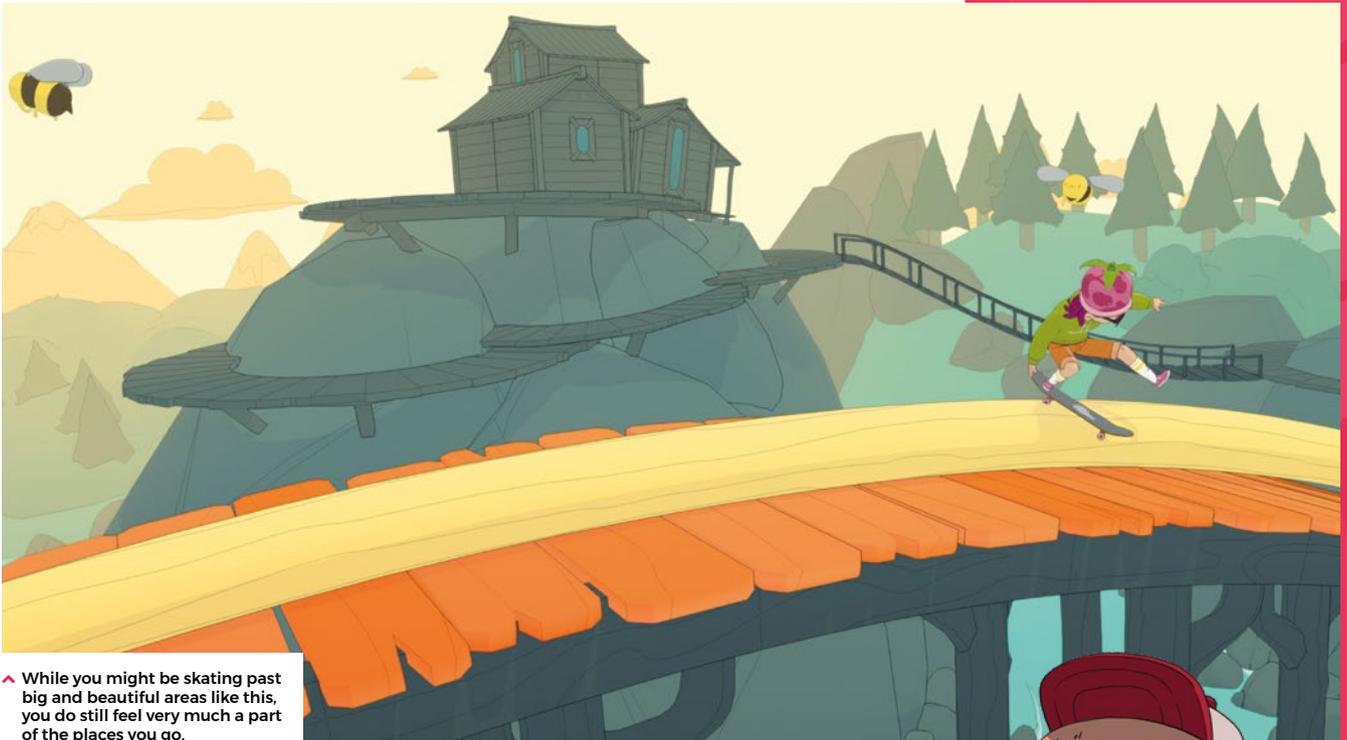
↑ While you might be skating past big and beautiful areas like this, you do still feel very much a part of the places you go.

within the world that reflects the vibe we have in the studio.

JR: *Not a Hero* was about a story, right? There is no fan art of *OlliOlli* or *OlliOlli2*. None whatsoever. Whereas there is quite a lot of fan art of *Not a Hero*. And I think it's having a story, having characters that people relate to, latch on to, or enjoy [that] encourages people to be part of the world and to be involved.

There was actually a slide in one of our early pitches, [which] was like, 'All of this art that we've had done for *Not a Hero* is what we want for *OlliOlli World*, and to do that we need characters and a world and stuff that people buy into'. The other thing, which is really easy for us to forget, is *Laser League* taught us how to be a remote studio of scale. We were remote before the pandemic: we went remote in 2015 as we were finishing *Not a Hero*, so *Laser League* was the first game that was built entirely remotely. [It showed] that we can make a synchronous multiplayer game that ships on all the platforms at the same time with a relatively big team, and we can all do that from home. So that became like a cornerstone – 'We're not going back to an office' – even before offices as a concept got destroyed.

You've been a remote studio for a while now – did that mitigate the impact the pandemic had on Roll7 and development of the game?

TH: We certainly were in a better position, having been remote since 2015. We had that experience, we had the setup, so we were able to move to the production and the creative challenges straight away. How do we get creative? We usually have people in the room and you can all sit around one screen and point at stuff and look at it. Even as a remote studio, we were meeting fairly regularly, and we had a really nice cadence of physical meetups, versus mainly being from home – and all that stopped. So those were the kind of problems we were able to solve. But obviously, I think this has been felt in every industry, the mental health impact that we're needing to look out for, for ourselves, but also for the wider team. A team of people working together really well, but [one made up of] individuals, and everyone deals with it very differently. Some people I think actually enjoyed the fact that there was less pressure to go out and do various things in front of people, →

KEEP ROLLIN'

Roll7's work away from the *OlliOlli* franchise has, it's safe to say, not been quite as popular as its BAFTA-winning skateboarding games. But that by no means indicates the studio pumped out a couple of stinkers: *Not a Hero* was a mix of swift, brutal, and dynamic gunfights with a hint of politics for good measure (and an alcoholic from St Helens), while *Laser League* offered an inventive, *TRON*-like future sport in the multiplayer realm. Both are still absolutely worth a play.

that really kind of interrupted their lifestyle. It was trying to accommodate all of that. There were a lot of people home-schooling as well, so we were a lot more flexible with hours and what people did; we were more realistic about what could be achieved in a week. No one has to come to meetups now, and we're still easing our way back into normal life, whatever normal life means.

JR: I will say I'm really glad that we spent the Covid years making a game that was cheerful. I can't imagine what it would have been like if you started on, like, a post-apocalyptic, post-viral outbreak shooter, just before 2020, with art imitating life for you. I'm really glad we were making a game that was cheerful, colourful, a happy place for people to be. The team really infused the game with a lot of love and cheer. A lot of that came from the world being a little bit scary and awful outside last year – and this year, too. I think people really wanted to put their positivity into something, and I think that really comes through in the game, which is great.

You've recently been acquired by Take-Two, slotting into the Private Division family. How did that come about? And what does it mean for Roll7's future?

TH: We've been working with Private Division in some form for nearly three years now. We first pitched *OlliOlli World* to them at GDC 2019, if I'm correct. There was an

It might look like an island, but we've been reliably informed this is actually an entire world. Anyone who claims otherwise is misinformed.
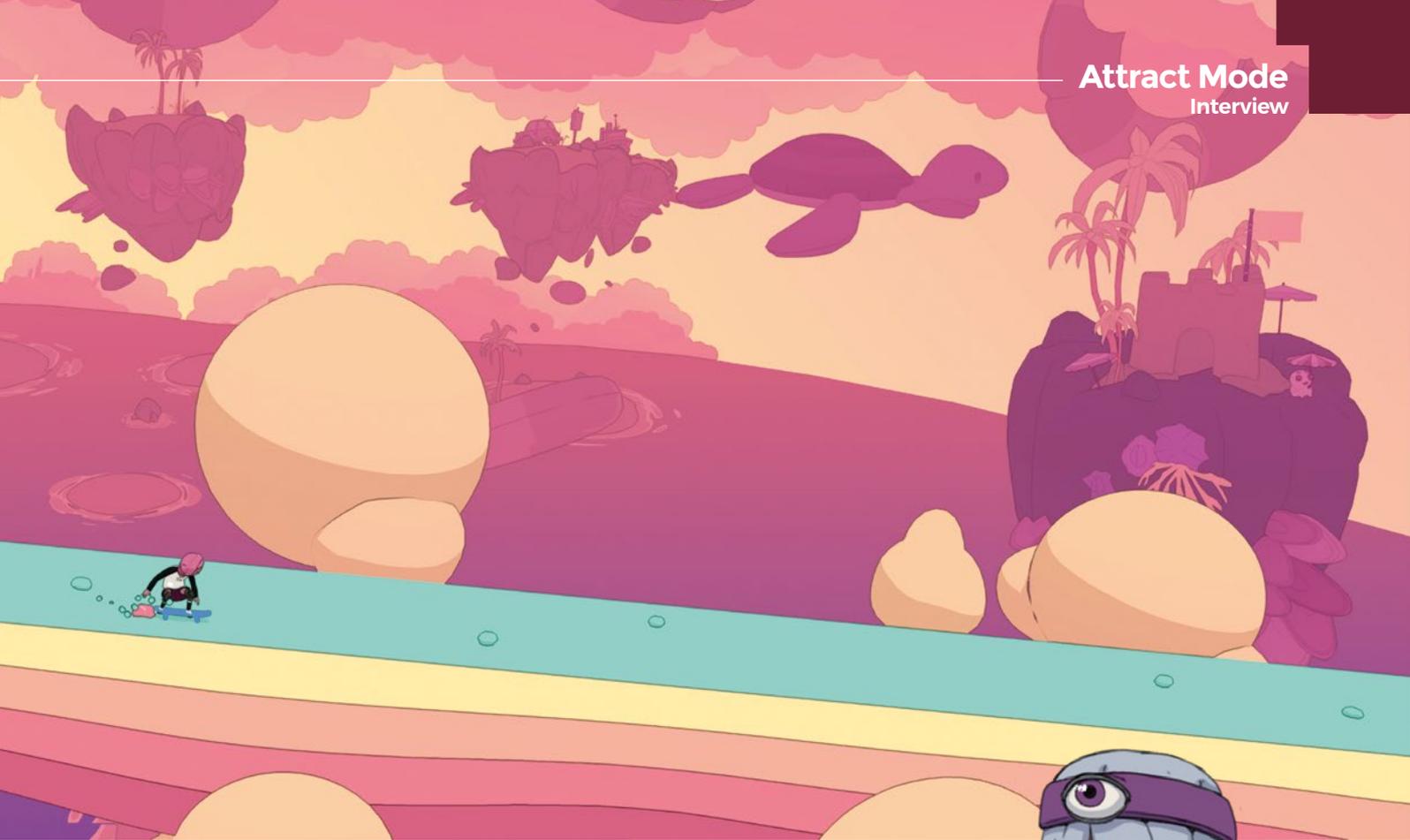
instant rapport and we've built on that rapport during the process. We've worked with a lot of publishers over the years and we just found with Roll7 and Private Division we got on really well, we understood each other, and it was really a degree of respect as well... not that we didn't have respect for other publishers, obviously. But just in terms of how we approached development, they were very open to the fact we were

"I'M GLAD WE WERE MAKING A GAME THAT WAS CHEERFUL"

trying something new, they understood what we'd done with *Laser League*, and we were approaching development in this more open way. They trusted us as well. We were very open with them from the start. We were never trying to hide where we were in the development process. We were, from very early on, showing the builds – not milestone points, just getting feedback. The feedback we've got has always been incredibly insightful too, really well thought out.

And – something we like to do with the team as well – we're given the problem and why they think it's a problem, but not necessarily the solution, which I think is really important. [It means] someone who's worked on that feature can own the solution. Plus with the feedback we do get, we've never ever been forced to make a change. If they think [one thing is] more important than something else,

Generate your routes – procedurally, that is – and share them with friends through the game's Postcode system. Wonder if it'll be Zip code in the US...

they will highlight it and go, 'We think you should look at this particular area', but it is completely up to us whether we do that. So that's one of many reasons why we did it. In terms of the studio, it's great for us because we can really plan long term. We've got someone who understands how we work and essentially wants to back us moving forward. It feels like a really strong partnership. And it means we can look at some of the other stuff – we've been prototyping other projects. We've got a really exciting vision that we were actually putting together probably this time last year, and when we showed it to Private Division, that's when the whole talk about the acquisition started. So it's really exciting that we get to work on the vision for a long time moving forward.

Also, we've built up this incredible team over the past two or three years, and we're able to now provide that long-term security for all of those people as well, which, as a small studio, is something you're always looking over your shoulder [and thinking about], 'Where are we, where's the funding coming from?' We've always managed to get projects in but it's really nice to know that we've got that kind of comfort and we can move forward as a studio. It allows us to be more ambitious and more creative as well. So I'm really excited about it.

Finally, what are your hopes for *OlliOlli World* on release?

JR: I hope it does really well. I hope people enjoy it. I hope it reviews really well. All the obvious ones. But I hope that when I bump into random people, and they ask what I do, and I say I made *OlliOlli World*, they don't go, 'Bit hard, didn't get past the first world'. Instead, they just go: 'I played it, it was really good, it made me smile, I had fun'.

TH: That look we've got in the past, almost like some people don't want to offend you, almost like, 'I think I should have liked that game because a lot of people said it was good, but secretly I didn't. I didn't like it, it was too difficult'. So that is definitely true. I hope people enjoy being in Radlandia because it's been so much fun creating what that world is, and it feels like a real place.

JR: I also hope that people dress up as Gnarly Mike and go to Comic Con. I hope people draw their own versions of BB Hopper, the business frog. I hope people go through every level to find Bridge Guy and take a photo of him. I hope it sort of inspires other people to be creative with the stuff that we've done in the world. Ⓦ

OlliOlli World **releases 8 February on PC, PS5, XB S/X, Switch, PS4, and XBO.**
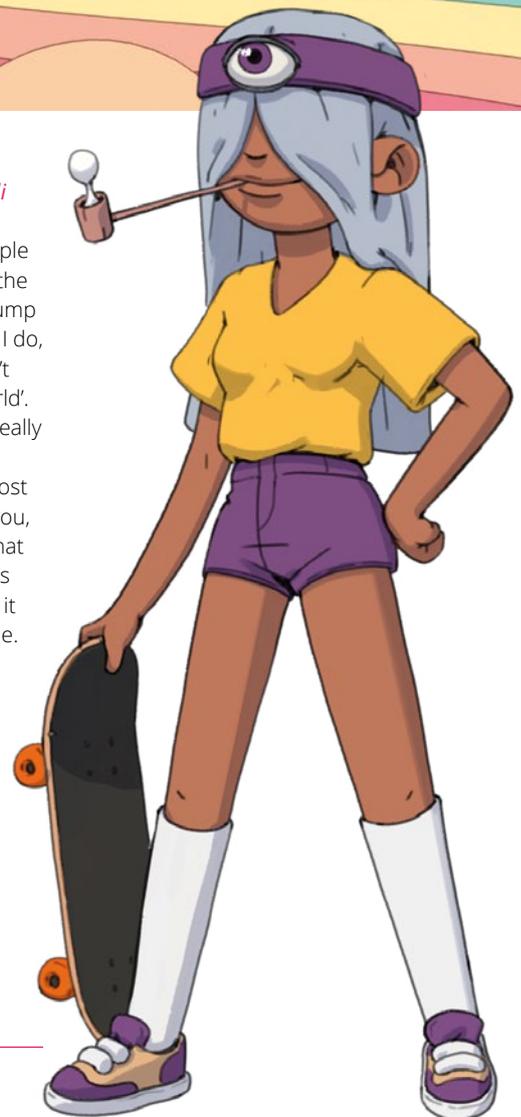
502's Arcade

Due out this year, a collection of score-chasing arcade games designed to test your brains and reflexes

Last month's edition of Wireframe was a celebration of arcade machines, and here's a game that aims to capture the hectic, score-chasing tone of a bygone coin-op age. Hailing from Guatemala, *502's Arcade* is a collection of retro-inspired games spread over a variety of genres. There's a colour-matching puzzler, a top-down dungeon crawler, and a fixed-screen shooter.

As you'd expect, they're all the kinds of games you can get to grips with in a minute or two, and all offer a tough challenge – the overarching aim being to hone skills at each one and make your way to the top of the high-score table. "At their core, each game is a high-score chaser, even when they are all from different genres," explains developer Bryan Alvarado. "The length of each one is different, and also depends on the skill of each player. We have this principle of respecting the time of the players and with that in mind, we are trying to design each one of them to be enjoyable from a few minutes to a few hours. Some of them have a clear progression and others have more of an endless feel to [them]."

Although *502's Arcade* was always conceived as a collection, it offered the team a chance to bring together ideas and prototypes they'd had in various stages of development for some time. The most fully realised concept among the game ideas was *Mighty Strike Team* (see box) – this was because the team had already released a version of it as a mobile app a few years earlier. "We kept getting feedback that the game would be great on a platform where you could actually use something other than touch as input, and have tighter control over the characters," Alvarado says. "We took the opportunity to improve a lot of things that we couldn't do in the mobile version, and we're confident that this version feels way better than its predecessor."

As well as the challenge of getting on the collection's leaderboards, there'll also be

MIGHTY STRIKE TEAM

A fast-paced shooter where you leap around a fixed screen, blasting endless hordes of alien enemies, *Mighty Strike Team* is the purest action game in the collection revealed so far, taking its cues from some of Japan's key coin-op titles of the eighties and nineties. "*Mario Bros.*, *Bubble Bobble*, and even *Metal Slug* had a great influence on its conception," says Alvarado.

^ *Potions Panic* sees you matching and clearing flasks of colourful elixir. Think *Puyo Puyo*, but with a hint of witchcraft.
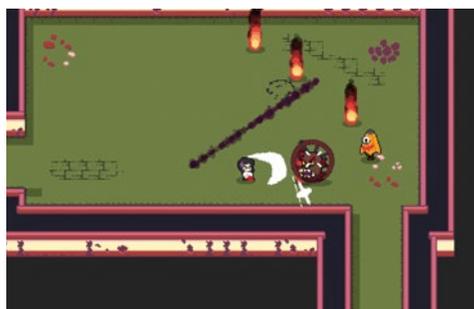
GHOST HUNTER HANA

With its shrine maiden heroine, this top-down run-and-gunner immediately made us think of Taito's cult series, *KiKi KaiKai* – you may know the SNES entry, released in the west as *Pocky & Rocky*. The game itself is quite different from *KiKi KaiKai*, though: first, it has twin-stick shooter controls, and second, its maps are procedurally generated, making it more akin to an arcade dungeon crawler.

^ *Ghost Hunter Hana* draws heavily on Japanese folklore for the enemies infesting its proc-gen dungeons.

separate achievements to attain in each game, as well as additional challenges that Alvarado and his five-strong team are still working through. "We've discussed adding some extra modes to some of the games, like a boss rush to *Ghost Hunter Hana*, but we're still discussing the best way to implement them, so it might take a while and will probably happen after release."

Real amusement arcades would change their line-up of games over time, and all being well, Alvarado says *502's Arcade* could follow suit, with new titles being added to the roster after its launch. "We've had a lot of game ideas and prototypes – more than we have time to work on, actually. Some of them are easier to adapt, but other ones might get their chance to get in later, when we figure out how to make them a fun experience."

"At their core, each game is a high-score chaser"

For now, 502 Studios is working on honing the three games it currently has lined up for the collection – along with a fourth title that hasn't been announced yet. Its launch is pegged for the first half of this year, and will serve as a considerable milestone for a studio that, since its inception in 2014, has had its fair share of ups and downs. "For a good number of those years," Alvarado says, "we've had to take other jobs and do our own work on the side, as the company wasn't making enough to sustain itself. But that hasn't stopped us from making games and trying to move our local industry forward." Ⓦ

POTIONS PANIC

A more cerebral entry in the collection, *Potions Panic* is a colour-match puzzler that looks like a hybrid of *Puyo Puyo* and *Puzzle Bobble* (or *Bust-A-Move*, if you prefer). It's a single-player-only experience at present, but it's possible that a two-player competitive mode will appear post-launch. "We have limited time and resources right now, so if we ever do [a two-player mode], it will probably be added after release," says Alvarado. "There are a lot of things we need to balance out to make a mode like that enjoyable, so we want to take our time to make it right."

Shattle
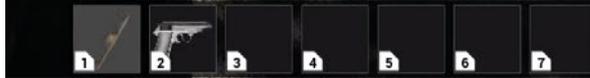
Emil Sandberg talks us through his team's upcoming survival shooter

˅ Maps are designed to encourage close-quarters combat and avoid too much tedious camping.

T his multiplayer survival shooter looks like serious business at first. It's 1970s Sweden, and outside the sprawling tenement building you call home, bombs are falling. With minutes before all-out war begins, your goal is to get to a bus that will take you to safety. The trouble is, everyone else is trying to escape, too, so with the clock ticking and limited space on the bus, you must gather what weapons and armour you can and fight or craft your way to safety.

There are signs everywhere that 5 Fortress' opus isn't taking itself all that seriously, though. First, there's the pace: bouts currently last a brisk 20 minutes, which discourages players from endlessly camping out on rooftops with a sniper rifle or tinkering away at a crafting table. While *Shattle* isn't a battle royale – the aim is to score points however you like rather than gun down

every person you see – time is still of the essence, and the game's designed specifically for short, fast-paced play sessions. "We always knew we wanted to create a survival game that doesn't take an hour to play," says studio co-founder Emil Sandberg. "It's for pure survival gamers that don't have the time anymore – maybe they've grown up and have a family, but they still want to play survival games."

Then there are the pigeons. When you die in *Shattle*, you're immediately reincarnated as a bird – the developer calls them doves, but they look more like pigeons to us – and they're quite realistic pigeons, too. In your avian mode, you're able to fly around the map, acting as a spotter for the remaining players you've sided with. And because there are up to 25 players in a *Shattle* bout, sessions can end with two dozen pigeons all flapping and strutting around, like a demented John Woo movie. "One of the things we like to do is create some sort of streamer-friendly content, so others can create and share lots of funny things with it," Sandberg says. "It totally breaks the concept of disaster and bombings and everything, but in a fun way... before, you didn't respawn during every bomb round – you just had one life. And from that we started to figure out, 'OK, if you die, you have to go and search for another server', which felt kind of lame. So that's where the dove was born, to find a way for dead teammates to actually help those that are still alive, to spot things through doors or help them avoid where enemies are."
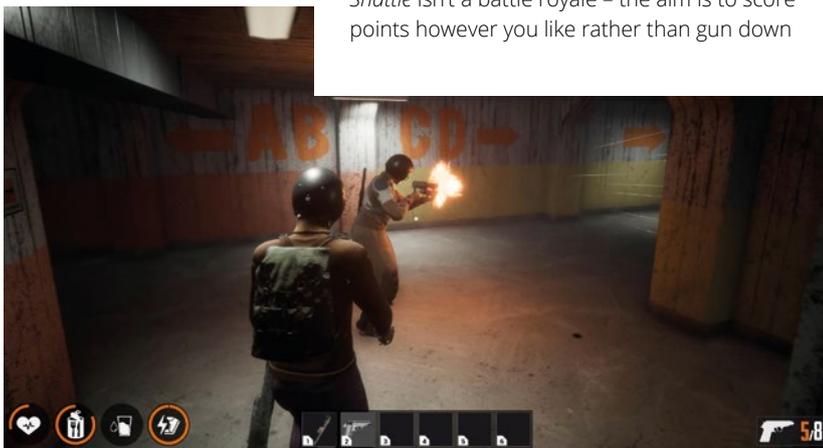
‹ Destructible environments add to the tension of each bout, forcing players to adapt their approach as bombs demolish the map.

Shattle's Swedish setting makes sense, given it's the home country of the developers behind it. But why such a specific era? "Most of us are from the northern part of Sweden," Sandberg explains, "and Boden is an old military town... we've all grown up with it, since most of our parents or family members have some connection to the Swedish force. The gameplay's based on a part of Sweden's defence [strategy] where, if the bigger cities got bombed, [citizens] would escape to the small villages and towns around Sweden. From there they'd be rescued by bus. So that's where [*Shattle*'s] story takes place: you missed the first bus and need to survive the bombing raids, and after that, a new bus will come through to get you out of there."

What's notable about 5 Fortress' approach is how flexible it's willing to be over *Shattle*'s design. The studio has a built-in ethos that it puts together an initial build over the course of six to eight weeks, then begins honing the concept based on player feedback. Those 20-minute bouts, for example, were initially pegged at a meatier one hour, before players commented that shorter bouts would make the game more intense. Similarly, the initial concept of having bombs tear up the landscape as bouts go on was originally more cosmetic, but is now being deepened based on player feedback. "We saw that the fighting gets much more hectic and stressful [with destruction], and you have more possibilities to actually hide, also," says Sandberg. "So the destruction system is really necessary so we can put more dynamics in the game."

"It's for pure survival gamers that don't have the time anymore"

There are just three developers behind *Shattle*, but Sandberg argues that having a small studio working on a multiplayer shooter has its advantages. "If everything goes well, we'll be able to put all our efficiency into the development, and iterate based on the feedback we get from the community... so our ambition for the studio is a maximum of ten people."

Indeed, Sandberg advises other indie studios to follow 5 Fortress' approach: get your multiplayer game in front of its audience as quickly as you can. "I would like to say the big tip for everybody is to start to generate the community as early as possible to actually get honest feedback," he says. "Get in the right direction at an early stage, because it's much easier to change something early than when it's starting to get done."

Shattle is still in its relatively early stages and, again, there's much that's still being changed based on its community's reactions – everything from the speed of equipping and loading guns to crafting to maps and non-player AI is still being worked on. Even that curious name could change in future (see box). Sandberg is confident that *Shattle* will be ready for Early Access in the first quarter of 2022, but again, the timing of that milestone will be based on player feedback. "We have a clear roadmap of what we want to develop," he says. "But it's up to when we see the pure data from players, then we'll be ready for Early Access. Basically, none of our players should pay for a game they don't feel is ready – so when everybody feels it's ready, we'll go for it." Ⓦ

WAIT, SHATTLE?

If you're wondering what the story behind the game's title is, Sandberg has the lowdown. It all began when the game was just getting started in the spring of 2021, he says, when the team was looking for "a short, snappy name that has no relation to anything else". It was then that the name *Shattle* emerged – a portmanteau, Sandberg explains, of Shelter and Battle. "A friend of mine who has a background in the games industry said, 'You should probably change the name because people might relate it to poop... so we started thinking about another name, but we didn't come up with any new ones. So we felt like, 'OK, if people actually start to feed back because it's bad or it's good, they're talking about the name at least!'"

Alliance Peacefighter

Wing Commander with a Homeworld/Star Fox aesthetic? Sold!

Info

GENRE
Spacey shooty

FORMAT
PC

DEVELOPER
Urban Logic Games

PUBLISHER
Urban Logic Games

RELEASE
Early 2022

SOCIAL
@DesignerBradley

⌄ It's linear rather than open world, but… who doesn't yearn for a linear space shooter? Nobody, that's who.

There was a burst of activity around the space sim genre about a decade ago, with the rise of crowdfunding preceding a rebirth of a much-loved, but commercially unviable genre. Or so we thought. What actually happened in the last decade is *Elite Dangerous* released, the *X* series from Egosoft continues to try and fix its mistakes, *No Man's Sky did* fix its mistakes, and *Star Citizen* took its place alongside classic non-console the Phantom in the ranks of 'Probably Never Actually Going To Release'.

Plus, the space games we *have* had tended to err on the side of exploration, discovery, or more of a role-playing bent. There's not been a whole lot of scooting about through space and shooting things – and that's where *Alliance Peacefighter* wants to step in. It sees a gap to plug, and it's going to give it a damn good go.

The game didn't start out life like this, though. Instead, it was spun out from a larger project, one that's been ongoing for a number of years now – *Flagship*, focused on commanding large capital ships in grand spacefaring battles.

As a part of *Flagship*, though, starfighter-focused mechanics had been developed, and from that, the idea to spin off into a fighter-only project started to coalesce. *Alliance Peacefighter* looks to the *Wing Commander*s and *FreeSpace*s of the world for its inspiration, putting the player smack-bang in the thick of things and making them the cockpit jockey hero of the tale. It's a simpler approach, that's for certain.

"I've wanted to make a space sim since I first played *Wing Commander* back in the 1990s," explains Brad Jeffrey, *Alliance Peacefighter*'s creator. "When I first got into making games, I had my sights set on something more focused on capital ships as there weren't many of those sorts of games around at the time… The desire to make a starfighter-focused game was always there though, and I'd made efforts to build fighter mechanics into my software framework, as I knew I'd be making one at some point. When circumstances required me to switch gears, making a more traditional space sim with a smaller scope made the most sense."

It's common for games to feature both VR and VR-less versions, but it's less common for both versions to be a focus from the off – but that's the case here, with *Alliance Peacefighter* being made with VR in mind alongside the flat-screen experience. It's a challenge to develop for both

forms, though, but one Jeffrey is confident the game will meet: "The biggest design hurdle was the cockpit layout; in VR, you can place displays and controls anywhere in the cockpit, but someone playing on a traditional monitor without any kind of head tracking will have a fixed view that only encompasses the top half of the front console," he says. "I had to ensure the most vital information was in the eyeline of this static view. There are controls that can be manipulated with VR motion controllers, but outside of VR, these can be safely out of view as their functionality is mapped to whatever controller is being used."

But it's not the VR angle that's being sold as the big reason to jump in here – rather obviously, given its flat-screen credentials from the outset. Instead, *Alliance Peacefighter* should appeal to that certain subsection of players who still feel underserved by modern releases. As well as those grander, open-world/ universe titles mentioned before, there's been, what, *Star Wars: Squadrons*? And that's about it in recent years. "I think the main appeal, at least within the space sim niche, is that it's a single-player game with a story in a genre that tends to be dominated by open-world and MMO-style games," Jeffrey explains. "Don't get me wrong, I'm partial to a bit of space trucking and exploration myself, but I don't think I'm the only one that misses authored stories in these games. For people who aren't generally space sim fans, it's a

> **"It's a pretty streamlined action game with quirky alien characters"**

pretty streamlined action game with quirky alien characters having adventures in space."

Games like this are relatively rare in the mainstream, and it's not *just* because of money. "I'm not sure how well *Star Wars: Squadrons* sold," Jeffrey says. "But I'm pretty certain the *Battlefront* games sold far better. It's a smaller, nerdier niche and it's going to take developers who love the genre and don't mind making a little less money."

The other factor making space shooters a rare sight these days is the seeming lack of ability to do much different from those that appeared in the 1990s. "The primary verbs are similar to other genres – m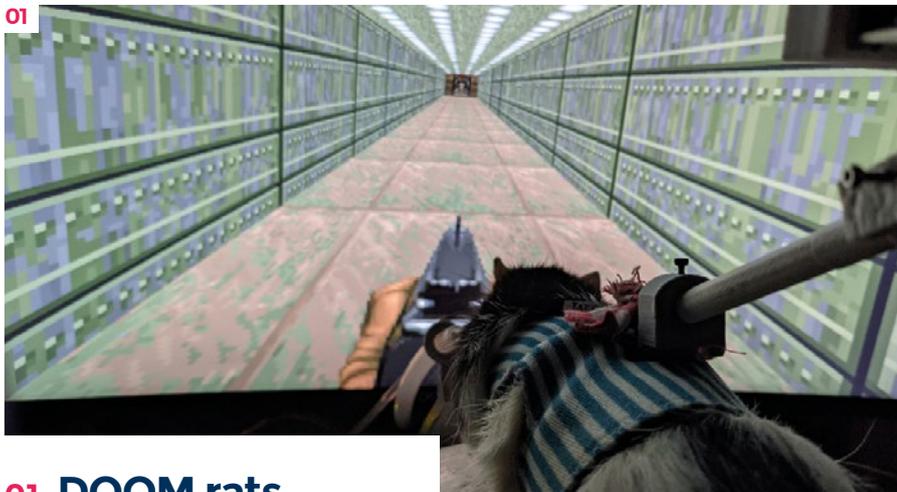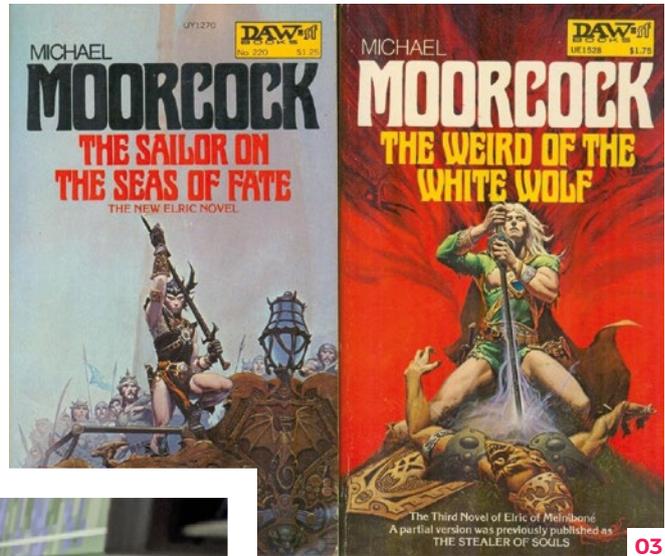ove, shoot, collect, and so on – but you're limited by the setting when it comes to what the end result of those actions is, and how they provide meaning to the player," Jeffrey continues. "Storytelling is also a challenge, I suppose because good stories are about people, and space games tend to be about spaceships. None of this is insurmountable, though."

Despite all that, here we are: approaching the release of a new space sim/shooter in 2022, with its influences hitting the likes of *Wing Commander*, *X-Wing vs. TIE Fighter*, *Homeworld*, and *Star Fox*. It's a small project, made largely by one person, and it doesn't have the multi-million dollar backing of an EA. But it does have spaceships, lasers, and explosions, so there's going to be a bunch of us out there who'll be keen on it. ⓦ

That was the month that was

01

02

03

01. DOOM rats

There's not much beyond the headline, but it's *DOOM* news so it has to be reported. One Viktor Tóth rigged three rats up on custom VR setups in order to teach them how to navigate their way through 3D corridors in the *DOOM II* engine. And it worked. Because rats are smart. The rats – Carmack, Romero, and Tom (Hall) – were making some headway towards being able to shoot enemies too, though this behaviour hadn't been fully learned by the furry blighters by the time Tóth wrote up his findings. Next: rats playing *DOOM* powered by potatoes on a fridge? Maybe. Read more about the process here: **wfmag.cc/doomrats**.

02. Ataristream

Atari has gone ahead with a "strategic investment" in retro game streaming platform Antstream, pumping some £377,000 ($500,000) into the UK-based company. The deal has the potential to increase the amount invested by a further £2.3m ($3m) over time, that money including the option for Atari to purchase gaming information repository MobyGames for £1.1m ($1.5m). Yes, Antstream owns/owned MobyGames – something that seemed to pass a lot of us by. The deal to snap up Moby is set to be concluded around March this year.

03. Moorcock games

File this one in unexpected: Michael Moorcock's dark fantasy series of novels starring the albino anti-hero swordsman Elric of Melniboné is to be made into a video game. The series of novels and comics has been consistently in print since debuting in 1961 and was meant to debut in the form of a Psygnosis title back in the 1990s, although that was quietly dropped. Now though, we have Swedish studio Runatyr running a project with Swedish dev collective Aurora Punks and UK studio Upstream Arcade, with a game on PC and consoles planned for a 2024 release. It'll be like the UK-born version of *The Witcher*. Probably.

Sega deal to bring *Sonic the Hedgehog* to Teslas. Gotta go within the speed limit.

Peter Molyneux to make blockchain-based game featuring NFTs, obviously

04

05

06
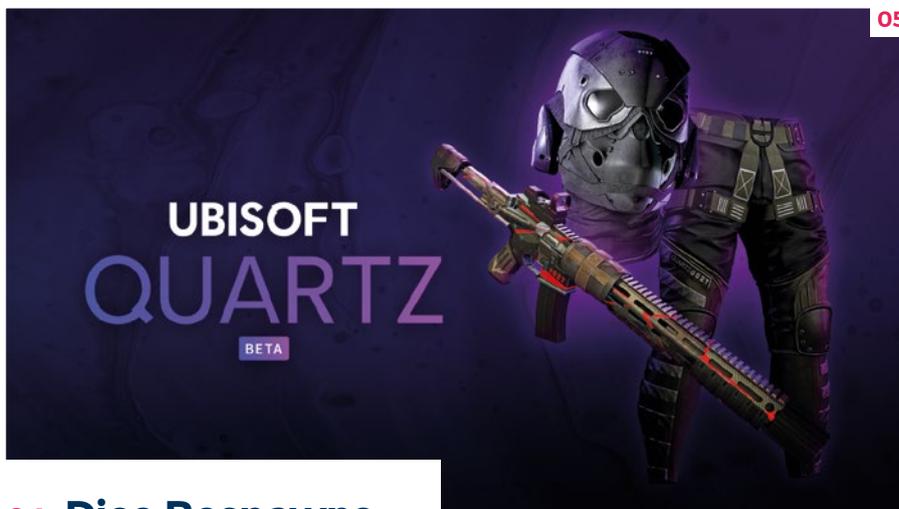
04. Dice Respawns

Vince Zampella, top bod at *Titanfall* studio Respawn and (formerly DICE LA) Ripple Effect, has been promoted and placed in charge of the *Battlefield* franchise as a whole. A man of many hats, it seems. "We're bringing one of the most influential and talented individuals in entertainment to a franchise that is ready to be unleashed into the modern era of gaming. It's an extraordinary inflection point in game history," EA COO Laura Miele said. Which would have us believe this move is in some way linked to the second coming? At least that's how it sounds. *Titanfall 2* was good, but *that* good? Hmm.

05. NFT news

Ubisoft Quartz is the future of gaming, or at least the future of profit-grabbing gimmicks from a huge publisher desperate to eke that bit more currency out of its players. Yes, friends, Ubi has embraced NFTs. What this means in simple terms is there's now a helmet in *Ghost Recon Wildlands* that players can have if they play for 600 hours (25 days). The future of gaming is now. Get on board, or be left behind. Other phrases to distract from just how awful this whole thing is. Big sigh all round? Yeah.

06. Nevermore

There has, of course, been way too much news – big and small – about Activision Blizzard since our last issue, and the company's ongoing issues around sexual harassment allegations and the ongoing legal case surrounding it all. Adding to the pile was the news that twelve QA team members at Raven Software had been fired, even though they'd been assured over previous weeks and months their roles were safe. Around 200 members of Raven's staff staged a walkout in protest at the firings, following on from around 45 people doing the same a day before. *People power*.
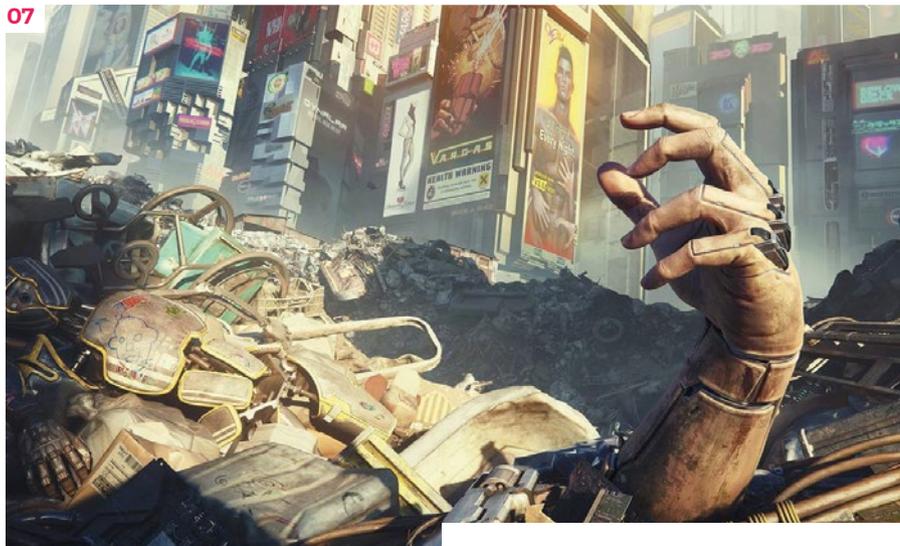
Thunder Lotus Games' charming afterlife simulator *Spiritfarer* hits one million sales

PS5 gets official coloured faceplates, including a rather fetching shade of pink

08

07

09

07. Cybersettled

CD Projekt Red was sued by investors over the performance of 2020's *Cyberpunk 2077*, which is too many years in quick succession. As spotted by Video Games Chronicle, that case is reportedly coming to a close, with the Polish dev-publisher apparently entering settlement talks with the aggrieved parties. The framework of the settlement is set to be formalised around 13 January, but sadly our time machine is broken so we've little to no idea what that's going to look like. Keep your eyes peeled, readers who care!

08. Disrespectful

Guy "Dr Disrespect" Beahm launched a new game development studio, Midnight Society, alongside fellow *COD* alum Robert Bowling and Quinn DelHoyo, *Halo 5*'s multiplayer designer. The goal is to create a brand new PVP online multiplayer game using Unreal Engine 5, which doesn't feel like it's outside of anybody's wheelhouse, really. Beahm previously worked as community manager and level designer at Sledgehammer Games, so does have more experience in making the things than your regular, run of the mill streamer. Further news, surely, will follow.

09. Massive

Amazon Studios is looking to get the go-ahead on a series based on BioWare's *Mass Effect*, Deadline has reported. The show would follow in the footsteps of such adaptations as *The Wheel of Time*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *The Boys* – among others – and you'd assume would see plenty of millions being showered on it to make it *actually decent*. Like Netflix did with the video game adaptation of *The Witcher* (which was a book, really). And speaking of Geralt, the White Wolf himself, Henry Cavill, has expressed a very early interest in the *Mass*-ive project, telling GamesRadar he was "very much" interested in a role in the potential show.

Minecraft videos hit over one trillion YouTube views

Keanu Reeves has never played *Cyberpunk 2077*, which probably explains his good mood
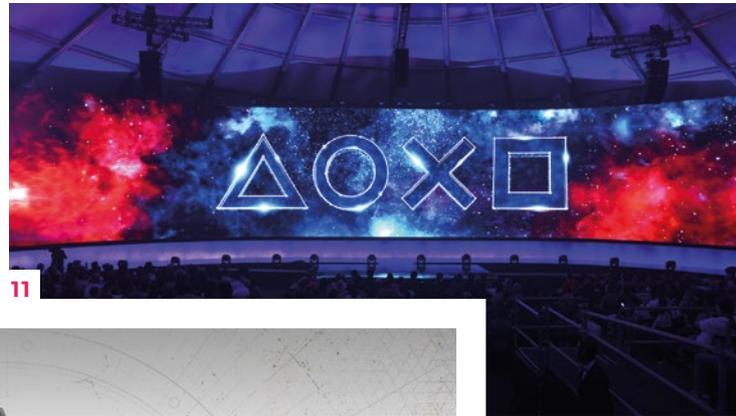
10. PlayStation discrimination lawsuit

PlayStation was hit with a gender discrimination lawsuit late in November, with a former employee attempting to form a class action lawsuit against the company for alleged gender discrimination and wrongful termination. The claims include that female employees were paid less than male counterparts and were denied promotions, as well as that "discriminatory employment practices, policies, and procedures are centrally established and implemented at the highest levels of Sony". Sony had not commented at the time of writing.

11. Bungie's destiny

Bungie is the latest in a long line of large development studios that has come under criticism, this time following allegations of a culture of crunch and sexist/racist abuse, which surfaced via an IGN report. Following the report, Bungie's CEO Pete Parsons made a post on the developer's site, which acknowledged the team has made some progress in eliminating the toxic culture, but saying: "We are not yet the studio we have the potential to become, but we are on our way. And we will not rest or slow these efforts because we recognise that the journey of inclusivity, diversity, and equity is, in itself, the destination we all strive towards. This is critical to achieving our vision and fulfilling the potential of the welcoming, equitable home of creative and technical excellence Bungie should be."

12. RIP Masayuki Uemura

And finally sad news, as it was announced Masayuki Uemura – lead architect behind both the NES and SNES – passed away in early December, aged 78. Uemura's career at Nintendo began back in 1972 and saw his involvement in the development of the company's furtive first steps into the home console world, before being heavily involved in the engineering behind two of the best consoles gaming has ever seen. Uemura was also producer on some games too, including legends like *Ice Climber* and *Nintendo Golf*. Safe to say, he had quite the impact on what modern gaming would end up being. Certainly better than introducing NFTs...

Sony set to launch PS5 equivalent of Xbox Game Pass, finally

Parents of those playing Roblox – watch this: **wfmag.cc/roblox**

Post Apocalypse

PS5 colour options, Resident Evil movies, and iffy GTA remasters: it's this month's letters...

Issue #57

True Colours

I read with some amusement that Sony has now decided that what the world needs is different coloured options for its PlayStation 5 console. Whilst the old goat in me wonders about the environmental impact of a purely cosmetic option, I confess I found myself utterly guffawing at the news.

I checked before writing this missive, and yep, there are still wide stock shortages, that are now expected to go on well into 2023. As such, what Sony is doing now is exquisite trolling: you can't get one of the consoles, but on the off-chance you could, it's now available in different colours! Presumably you won't be able to get the assorted colour options either.

Fair play to Nintendo. I used to sigh when it kept releasing

DS machines in different coats, but at least you could get hold of the things.
Liz Stone

Ryan writes:
People have been having all kinds of trouble getting hold of a new PlayStation 5 – me included – so I've come up with a handy stopgap. Buy some PlayStation 5 faceplates, and glue each half to either side of an old PlayStation 4. Hey presto: a vaguely PS5-looking console to put under the television and generally impress neighbours, offspring and passers-by.

The plan is that this should keep me going until, ooh, late 2023, when proper PlayStation 5s will hopefully be available at a not-ridiculous price.

The Movie Game

Appreciating your editor's former home, can I just say that the new *Resident Evil* film, *Welcome To Raccoon City*, wasn't terrible. The curse of the video game-to-film adaptation is not broken, but neither does this one have to sit in the naughty corner.
Craig Dodds

Ryan writes:
I'm happy to hear this, not least because the trailer for *Resident Evil: Welcome To Raccoon City* made it look like an iffy fan flick. On the subject of movies based on video games, has anyone seen the 2006 *Silent Hill* film directed by Christophe

Gans? Given how bad these sorts of things typically are, it really isn't bad at all, and does a good job of capturing the ominous tone of the game. Do steer clear of 2012's *Silent Hill: Revelation*, though. That one's horrifying in all the wrong ways.

Shortcuts

Bomb Rush Cyberfunk is the cool younger brother of *Jet Set Radio* who has just found his older sibling's favourite trousers, and *Frogun* is the chirpy froggy 3D platformer that can kindle a happy flame in even the most cynical and downtrodden of hearts. It'll be a good year!
@ckettlefrisby

TRIANGLE STRATEGY: game looks beautiful, plays well, and makes me think while being enjoyable. The demo really sold me.
@umbreon3000

S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2 for me – being on Xbox Game Pass is obviously a big plus but that reveal trailer was jaw-droppingly stunning. Major atmosphere and hype all from that one trailer.
@lariatolounge

I'm still feeding the hope that we will be able to play *Hollow Knight: Silksong* in 2022, even if I'm probably daydreaming.
@ToshNobody

Tiny Tina's Wonderlands! As a HUGE fan of the *Borderlands* series, I adored the original DLC (from *Borderlands 2*) it's inspired by and it'll be interesting to see how Gearbox have expanded Tina's DnD adventures further.
@MskieRiot

Generally Terrible Antics

The farcical release of the *Grand Theft Auto* trilogy remaster should surely be a long-needed rocket up the backside of publishers who, I feel, have long been taking customer loyalty for granted. I share the nostalgia of many, but surely if your release schedule's empty, there's a better way than bashing together a bizarrely incomplete collection of already completed games and sitting back to watch the cash roll in?

What we've seen with *Grand Theft Auto* is the peak, I hope, of taking gamers for a metaphorical ride. Which, in this case, turned out to at least be a less bug-filled ride than the one we got in the game.
Alan Thorp

Ryan writes:
What was almost as shockingly bad as the so-called *Definitive Edition* was what Rockstar sneakily did with the original versions: as the remasters became available to buy online, the previous releases of *Grand Theft Auto III*, *GTA: Vice City*, **and *GTA: San Andreas* were withdrawn from most digital stores. Rockstar later backtracked a little bit, as the full dreadfulness of the *Definitive Edition* games became clear, and said that the original versions would be made available to download again, but only on their own online shop. This left anyone hankering for the PS4 versions – which were very good – out of luck, since there appear to be no plans to return the original *GTA* releases to the PlayStation Store. All in all, it's a pretty sorry state of affairs.**

The burning question

For this month's poll, we asked Twitter, which of the following gems was your favourite game of 2021? Our readers, it turns out, overwhelmingly prefer pressure washers.

- **Lawn Mowing Simulator** – **32**%
- **Farming Tractor Simulator** – **4**%
- **PowerWash Simulator** – **50**%
- **Bus Simulator 21** – **14**%

Video games to look forward to in

2022

A new year beckons, and with it, lots of new video games. Here's a pick of our most anticipated titles, both large and small

WRITTEN BY **RYAN LAMBIE & IAN DRANSFIELD**

▲ KERBAL SPACE PROGRAM 2

The wait goes on for the next trip into space – or the next trip to the stratosphere. Or, actually, the next trip to the launchpad before exploding as soon as you engage the engines. But there's still a palpable excitement behind the next generation of space program simulation being worked on by Intercept Games and the original title's developer, Squad. Intergalactic journeys, space stations, colonies, multiplayer – it's all the sorts of things you want to see come to a sequel, and as long as that delightful feeling of *genuine* exploration is maintained, there's no way *Kerbal 2* will fail us.

▼ FORSPOKEN

From Luminous Productions and using the Luminous Engine, there's a lot that's luminous about *Forspoken*. It's bright and sunny, for one. It's bright behind the scenes too, though, with the action-RPG written by a team including Amy Hennig and Gary Whitta, while our lead character will be brought to life by British breakout star Ella Balinska, and the music team includes one Bear McCreary. So it's got the talent involved, it's a current-gen exclusive (being stuck on PS5 for two years following release), it has the weight of Square Enix behind it, and it features a talking bracelet. What could possibly go wrong?

▲ THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD 2

Does this game even need an introduction? (Yes, it does – Ed.) The first *Breath of the Wild* was a landmark of its day – a bold new direction for the *Zelda* series that harked back to elements from the early games while deftly appropriating bits from western action-RPGs like *Skyrim*. Nintendo's hinting at an altogether darker sequel for release this year: perhaps it'll be to *Breath of the Wild* what *Majora's Mask* was to *Ocarina of Time*. Whether it introduces bold new elements or simply stirs around existing ones, we're more than ready to take a trip back to the systems-based take on Hyrule we last got lost in five years ago. Oh, and please bring that amazing cooking melody, please, Nintendo. As we mentioned way back in issue five, no matter how many hours we put into *Breath of the Wild*, we never got sick of it.

▲ A PLAGUE TALE: REQUIEM

Asobo Studio's previous game, *A Plague Tale: Innocence*, was one of 2019's most pleasant gaming surprises: about a young woman and her little brother fighting for survival in a rat-infested 14th century France; it was original, absorbing, and often exquisite to look at. The two leads from the first game are back, now a bit older but no less imperilled, and so too are those great tidal waves of hideous rats. Specifics are thin on the ground for now, but *Innocence* was a beautiful-looking game, so we can only wait and see what Asobo have managed to pull off now they have a new generation of console hardware to play with. ➡

▲ HORIZON FORBIDDEN WEST

A game that actually appeared in a similar 'year ahead' list in these pages exactly a year ago, *Horizon Forbidden West*'s delay means we're still waiting for Guerrilla Games' post-apocalyptic sequel to emerge. Such frustrations aside, our enthusiasm for a current-gen continuation of *Horizon Zero Dawn*'s heady brew of exploration and robot animal hunting remains undimmed. Now hurry up and release the bloomin' game, Guerrilla.
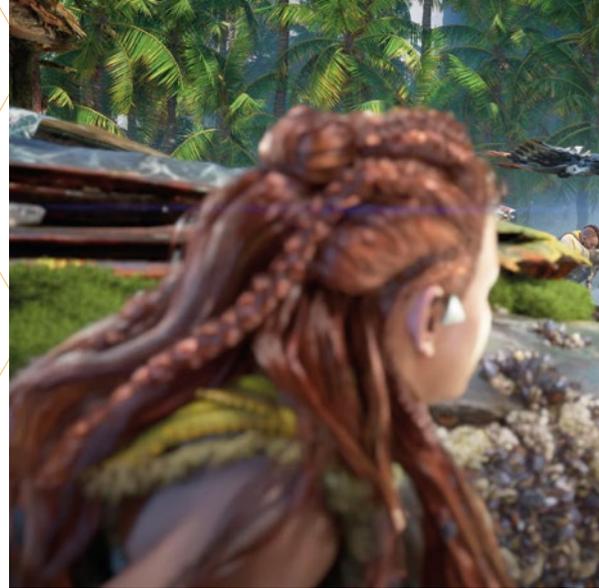
▲ SPLATOON 3

While the Wii U was struggling to get a footing in 2015, Nintendo put out one of its most confident, original titles in years. The first *Splatoon* was the Big N's take on a 4v4 multiplayer competitive shooter, and it was an absolute cracker: anarchic, colourful, and more welcoming to newcomers than most online battle fests. Its emphasis on teamwork – objective: paint the map with your team's colour – meant that even less adept players could feel like they were positively affecting the outcome of a battle. *Splatoon 2* freshened up the concept for the Switch, but didn't add too much to the formula. It remains to be seen whether the upcoming second sequel will push things a little further: at present, though, one of the big new additions appears to be vehicles. One of the most enticing of these is the Crab Tank – a bulbous mecha that rolls around the battlefield, splattering paint all over the place with its massive cannon. Sounds fabulous.

SAINTS ROW

One of gaming's most irreverent action sandboxes is getting a reboot. It's strange really, that it's nearly a decade since the release of the last full sequel, *Saints Row IV*, since its febrile antics – step forward, the Dubstep Gun – are still fresh in our minds. Volition is reportedly toning down some of that game's more risqué elements for the upcoming reboot, which is probably just as well. If they've retained the sheer fun – and wild abilities – of the earlier games, though, we should be onto another winner here.

▲ S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2: HEART OF CHERNOBYL

Better late than never, eh? Developer GSC Game World announced the sequel to its chilly open-world shooters back in 2009, before both the game and the studio were suddenly abandoned a couple of years later. Thankfully, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2* is back on again, and GSC has spent the past four years quietly working away on what we hope will be another atmospheric, disturbing survival experience. Given just how many incredible interlocking systems the first *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* managed to pack into computers over ten years ago, we're fascinated to see what GSC come up with for the sequel.

▲ SIFU

From Sloclap, the developer of 2017's *Absolver*, comes an epic-looking martial arts adventure. Its revenge plot and third-person action vaguely bring to mind the *Shenmue* games, but what immediately separates *Sifu* is its sheer commitment to the detail of fighting: there are said to be around 150 moves to master, borrowing from a variety of martial arts styles, and you can combine these to elegantly batter your opponents into mumbling submission. There are destructible environments, too, which means you can also kick an opponent through walls and so forth. We're really looking forward to this one.

▲ GRAN TURISMO 7

The *Gran Turismo* games may be for proper driving sim nerds, but we've always enjoyed buying the same clapped-out car we drove as students, spending an absolute fortune on upgrades, and trying to race around Rome and avoid coming last. This is the secret of the series' long-term appeal, perhaps: yes, *Gran Turismo*'s for gamers who like to obsess over racing lines and choosing the perfect set of shock-absorbers, but it's also a vehicular sandbox of sorts. Whether you're racing seriously in a Pagani Zonda or just pottering about in a Ford Fiesta, you can still have fun in *Gran Turismo*. The seventh game will be bigger and sharper, no doubt, but we're hoping it'll retain that same universal appeal.

▲ STARFIELD

The more we hear about *Starfield*, Bethesda's first original RPG in a *long* time, the more we think it sounds less like 'Skyrim in space' and more like 'No Man's Sky without any Roger Dean inspiration'. It's space exploration with a more science-based, grounded bent – you're unlikely to be clambering across mountain-sized mushroom trees before chatting to a cat-person about illicit substances made from moon sugar, basically. What it will involve is the Bethesda 'reveal', where the world – the universe – is made apparent in one almost overwhelming moment, and it will definitely include the ability to pick up and pore over a load of irrelevant rubbish like future-coffee cups and future-bins. Can't wait.

EARTH DEFENSE FORCE 6

Every time a new *EDF* title releases, some faith in humanity is restored. This is a series that has been going for decades; one that has spanned multiple console generations; and one that has remained resolutely budget, and a bit crap. It's absolutely wonderful. *EDF 6* will be more of the same – fighting off endless waves of giant alien creatures across mega-destructible cityscapes. It will be shallow. It will be dumb. It will suffer countless technical hitches. It will be wonderful again.

▲ BAYONETTA 3

By the time *Bayonetta 3* releases – should it land in 2022, as planned – it will have been eight years since the last game arrived on, of all things, the Wii U, and it will have been five years since the third game was announced to the world. It's been a wait, is what we're saying, and as such there's a real anticipation for Platinum's third outing for the hyper-sassy witch. What can be done to freshen the experience? That's not entirely clear. But if it brings that flawless mix of style and skilful action out to play once again, there are unlikely to be too many complaints.

▼ ELDEN RING

The mystery has faded somewhat from *Elden Ring*, with BANDAI NAMCO bringing a limited network test (or 'demo', as some might call it) to plenty of players towards the end of last year. What we know from playing the game is that it is very much FromSoftware doing the From thing – it's Soulslike, it's enigmatic, and it's very challenging. There's plenty still to learn, though, and plenty to see in the new open world it all takes place in, full of marauding giants, outposts to raid, and invisible bush-creatures to get confused by. Should at the very least be a bit of a giggle. ➡

▲ GRID LEGENDS

Codemasters may now be under the Electronic Arts umbrella, but we remain optimistic that it'll keep making some of the best racing sims money can buy. Moreover, we're hoping that *GRID Legends* can recapture the incredible damage physics of the first game in the series, *Race Driver: GRID* – a system that turned every race into a tightrope walk between exhilarating victory or humiliating roadside disaster. Seriously, for a game released in 2008, it was properly impressive stuff. Codemasters has emphasised the sequel's live-action cutscenes in the footage we've seen so far, but look closely, and you'll see a racing car flip over a couple of times, leaving bits of metal shimmering in its wake. It's good to see you back, *GRID*.

▲ METAL SLUG TACTICS

The *Metal Slug* series is famous for its exquisite sprite design and its ferocious run-and-gun action. Does it really make sense to press this bullet-infested cycle of games into a turn-based strategy mould? Based on what we've seen so far, the answer's an undoubted yes. Bouts look quick and breezy, recalling the likes of *Advance Wars*, while the charming sprites – including those iconic, chunky little tanks – are present and correct. We've high hopes that French developer Leikir Studio are doing the *Metal Slug* name proud with this one.

▲ SOL CRESTA

It started out as an April Fool's joke – or at any rate, the timing of its announcement led people to assume it was. But no, it's true: eminent Japanese studio PlatinumGames is turning its hand to a traditional 2D shoot-'em-up. Specifically, a belated sequel to a series of old Nichibutsu arcade games – *Moon Cresta*, *Terra Cresta* – that are pretty obscure outside Japan. This is very much an oddity, then, but PlatinumGames' name alone makes us intrigued to see how it'll handle such a time-worn genre.

▼ SOMERVILLE

If you haven't encountered this one yet, here's the first thing you need to know about *Somerville*: it's a new game from one of the animators who worked on *Limbo* and *Inside*. The second thing you need to know is: it's an H.G. Wells-inspired alien invasion yarn set in contemporary Britain, and it looks frankly brilliant. Wait, that's three things isn't it? Ah, well.

Honourable mentions

THE SERPENT ROGUE

Team17's roguelike action adventure has a uniquely gloomy look and feel. Alchemy, plagues, and taming animals. A full evening's entertainment, we're sure.

THYMESIA

Like *The Serpent Rogue*, this action-RPG – also published by Team17 – has an engagingly bleak medieval plague theme.

▲ COMPANY OF HEROES 3

A modern classic series in the RTS genre, *Company of Heroes 3* stays put in the Second World War while moving the action (and tactics, and strategy) to the Mediterranean. Early impressions from the demo version have been largely positive, with maestros Relic at the helm once more and that experience shining through with how it plays. If you don't know what to expect from a *COH* title, it's: intense action, intense tactics, intense strategy, and general intensity across the entire battlefield and beyond. The last two were extremely good war games; hopes are high the third one will keep things moving in the right direction.

▲ FLASHBACK 2

Maybe it's just the nostalgia talking, but we quite like the idea of a new game set in the same sci-fi universe designer Paul Cuisset dreamed up in 1992. *Flashback* was, of course, a 2D action platformer with a cinematic edge: its story, about an amnesiac hero trying to figure out why he'd been dumped on an alien planet, had shades of 1990s movies like *Total Recall*. Cuisset's back for the sequel, having teamed up with developer Microids. Little else has been revealed about *Flashback 2*, so we're just going by pedigree for now. Here's hoping it'll be worth the three-decade wait.

▶ KIRBY AND THE FORGOTTEN LAND

HAL does its own cutesy take on *The Last of Us*? Probably not, but there are distinctly post-apocalyptic vibes to this latest outing for the aggressively hungry pink hero. Footage released last year saw Kirby wandering around what looks like an abandoned city; other than the cheery sunlight, it really does look like the sort of place various Clickers, Shamblers, and Bloaters might lurk. What's really appealing about *Kirby and The Forgotten Lands*, though, is the notion that it's taking the series in what appears to be a 3D, more open-world direction. We've always had a soft spot for the *Kirby* franchise, but it's exciting to see HAL attempt something new.

▼ STRAY

If you're suffering from a smidgen of cyberpunk fatigue after a recent run of (admittedly nice-looking) games set in grotty cities full of neon signs, then at least rest assured *Stray* has a unique twist up its sleeve: in essence, it's *Blade Runner* viewed from the perspective of a ginger house cat. How has nobody thought of this before? The 3D future world developer BlueTwelve Studio is cooking up for *Stray* looks spectacular, too, so here's hoping it'll be a bit less glitchy than a certain other high-profile cyberpunk game we won't mention. ➡

CHRONO ODYSSEY

Not a belated *Chrono Trigger* sequel, sadly, but a pretty intriguing (and pretty-looking) MMORPG hailing from South Korea's NPIXEL.

GOODBYE VOLCANO HIGH

A coming-of-age saga, with the twist being that the angsty teenagers at the centre are all dinosaurs in their last year of school.

B.I.O.T.A.

From indie developer small bros, a chunky 8-bit Metroidvania steeped in the minutiae of 1980s sprite and game design.

▼ BALDUR'S GATE 3

It's a weird one, because lots of us have been playing – and putting in plenty of hours – with *Baldur's Gate 3* for over a year now. But them's the breaks when it comes to Early Access releases, especially when handled

in the way Larian has been working this one. The game you can play now is already brilliant, but it's ever-improving, more content is being added, genuinely impactful tweaks are being introduced, *and* there's still the rest of the game – and all that wonderful Mind Flayer-inspired story – to come. Here's hoping 2022 is the year when it all finally comes together.

▼ DYING LIGHT 2
STAY HUMAN

The original seemed to fly under the radar as a gem in the open world zombie-'em-up genre, while this sequel seemed to be in an eternal state of development. But having being announced in 2018 and in development for ages, it's finally out in February. There's more focus on narrative this time, with a zombie-filled world and a society trying to rebuild itself from the ashes, and the player's choices driving how it pans out. Honestly, as long as it maintains the superb mix of desperate parkour and impactful, genuinely intense zombie combat (zombat?), they can do whatever they want with the story – it'll still be a lark.
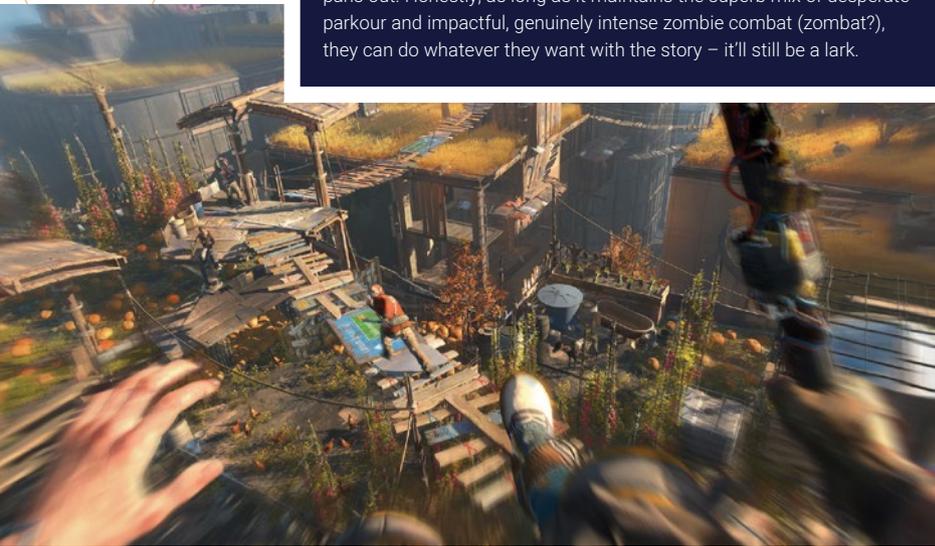
▲ KINGDOMS OF THE DUMP

It's not just nineties-inspired first-person shooters coming from the world of indie devs – there's still plenty of titles with their homage-roots firmly in the 16-bit RPG genre. *Kingdoms of the Dump*, for example – Kickstarted in 2019 and set to release later in 2022, the game mixes inspiration from the likes of *Final Fantasy VI*, *Chrono Trigger*, and the beloved *EarthBound*. It's more than lip service, though, with battles involving strategic movement and placement, a story of custodians in a world of trash, and plenty more to give the game a character and feel all of its own.

▲ OUT THERE:
OCEANS OF TIME

A sequel that moves the home platform from mobile to home devices, *Oceans of Time* maintains plenty of what made the original game so alluring: space, exploration, and exploration of space. A stylishly pulpy sci-fi adventure in which you explore a galaxy that changes each time you start a new run, engage in a branching narrative, meet and greet with hitherto unknown alien species, and generally do all that intergalactic adventuring that's so much fun to do. It also looks lovely, handily.

TINY TINA'S WONDERLANDS

A *Borderlands* spin-off, this one's a mix of FPS and action RPG, no doubt served up with the series' usual pint of in-your-face humour.

DEAD SPACE

The sci-fi horror series is back after an almost-nine-year hiatus. Will it thrive at its new home, Motive Studios? We'll find out later in 2022.

MUSHI COME HOME

An absolutely charming-looking exploration adventure about a lost mushroom.

▼ ELEX II

Piranha Bytes is happily flying the flag for the mid-level studio with *ELEX II*, which can't be classed as either indie or triple-A. It's science fantasy, mixing swords-and-armour with lots of shiny neon, and acts as sequel to the largely overlooked original. As long as players can be welcomed into *ELEX II* with a bit more care than they were by the stultifyingly difficult original, we could be onto a sleeper hit here.
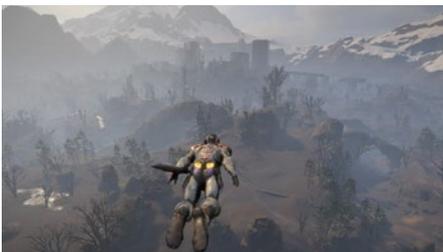
▼ THE DAY BEFORE

Gritty survival MMOs set in post-pandemic worlds might seem a bit on the nose given… everything, but some of them deserve a nod all the same. Fntastic's game doesn't look to rewrite the book on the survival genre: you wake up with no memory, there are 'infected' around, you're scavenging for supplies, and so on. But while many genre stablemates are a bit of a mess, *The Day Before* looks stunning. We don't know if we'll be getting murdered by some random online strangers in this one, but at least everything will look nice if we do.
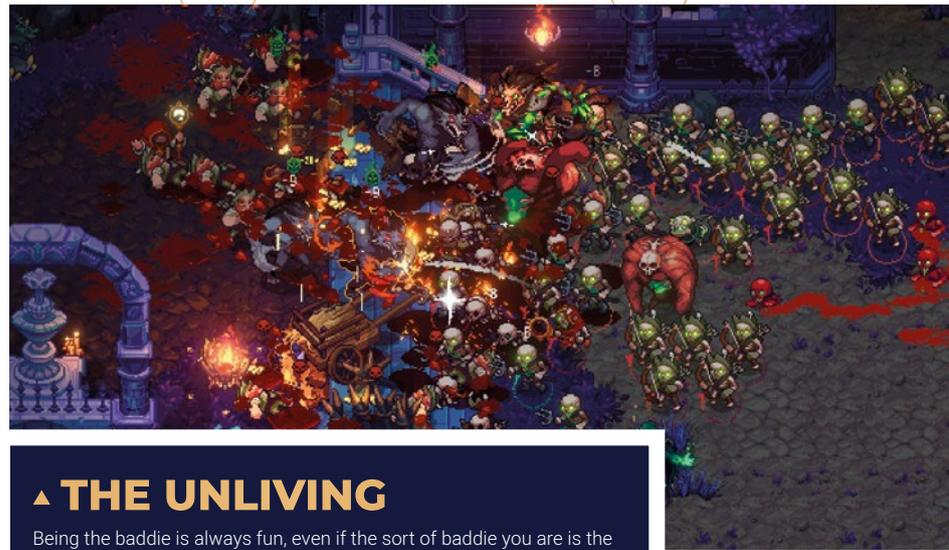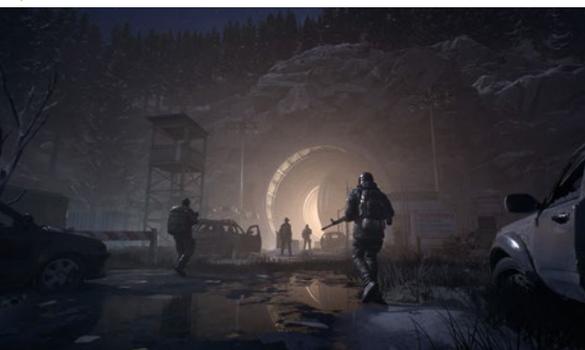
▲ THE UNLIVING

Being the baddie is always fun, even if the sort of baddie you are is the type who makes the dead do their bidding. Yes, *The Unliving* casts you in the role of a necromancer, raising an army of less-than-living sorts to help bring down the forces of 'good' and 'unity' and 'being alive'. But where does one source their community of deceased warriors? Why, from communities of the living, of course – yes, *The Unliving* also sees you farming your own zombie hordes by initially battling villagers, soldiers, and whoever else is in your way before raising their still-warm corpses to fight on your side. How delightfully grim.

▲ SELACO

Built in GZDoom it might be, but *Selaco* is unlikely to be confused for id's original FPS masterpiece, even if it is using an (updated, non-id) engine to bring it all together. No, this is a set-piece-heavy sci-fi shooter, full of pitched neon-lit gun battles, destructible environments, and an immersive world to explore and fart around in. It's probably safe to say *Selaco* owes more to *Duke Nukem 3D* than it does *DOOM* – but all the same, this is very much its own thing. And it looks like it could be a fabulous time. Ⓦ

THE CALLISTO PROTOCOL

Dead Space's Glen Schofield is helming this sci-fi horror opus. His association alone has us intrigued.

GHOSTWIRE: TOKYO

Evil spirits and supernatural fisticuffs in contemporary Japan. Tango Gameworks' action-horror's been on our radar for a while now.

GOD OF WAR RAGNARÖK

The franchise's Norse era will no doubt come to a bone-crunching close in the series' ninth adventure.

Games TV isn't dead

KIM JUSTICE

Kim Justice is a YouTuber, streamer, and writer who specialises in the world of retrogaming. If she isn't making lengthy documentary videos about old games and companies, she's probably chatting and mouthing off about them live to a dedicated handful of people.
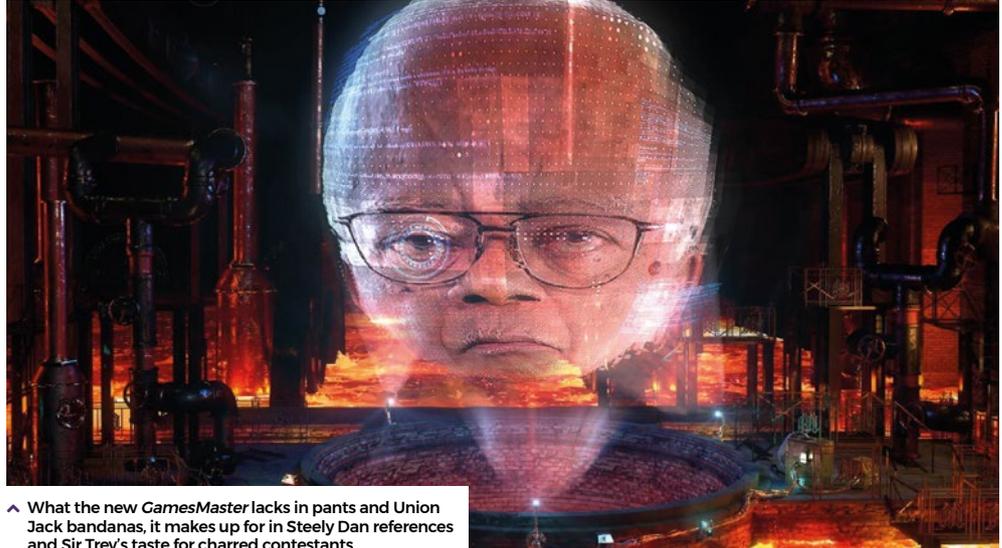
▲ What the new *GamesMaster* lacks in pants and Union Jack bandanas, it makes up for in Steely Dan references and Sir Trev's taste for charred contestants.

E4's revival of *GamesMaster*, the much-loved games TV show of old starring Dominik Diamond and a thousand allusions to pants, is by any measure a triumph. After 23 years away from our screens, it's a shining example of how to modernise a highly nostalgic show while still remaining true to its roots, and it flies in the face of the common wisdom that video games have no place on traditional television.

It shouldn't be a surprise, of course, considering the talent of the people involved – the hosting trio of Rob Florence, Frankie Ward, and Ty Logan cover just about every base, from the best of old games TV to modern esports coverage with a good mix of comedy and analysis. They certainly know how to both make watching games exciting and how to communicate the mechanics of them to an audience, while the addition of cameo roles from the likes of professional wrestler Grado and legendary *Games World* Videator Big Boy Barry add a few cherries on top. And of course, the casting of Sir Trevor McDonald as the titular GamesMaster has proven to be an inspired choice – he's clearly loving the role, adding dry commentary as another failing challenger gets flushed into the abyss.

When it comes to what's changed about the new show as opposed to the old one, it's more of a delicate restoration as opposed to a big overhaul – they've kept it simple, with additions that reflect the personalities of those involved (such as Rob's reviews sticking close to his old *videoGaiden* formula). Challenges are still the main focus, as they were in the nineties, and they're as good as ever, with features also providing a chunk of the show's endearing mix of items. It's just that now the features are more focused on modern aspects of gaming such as game jams or humorous tests of video game armour in real life, rather than a behind-the-scenes VT going across the pond for the latest FMV disasterpiece from Digital Pictures.

Are there things I'd like to see more of? Well, naturally I'd like to see more retro stuff, but then I am an old git and in truth, the show does a fine job with the modern games it presents. I'm sure that if the new *GM* is to extend beyond this initial three-episode run, we'll see the team continue to push the show forward – and I, for one, really hope it does. In this world of YouTube, Twitch, and all that, people wondered if this was worth it at all, and if it was going to find an audience – but when something's made with a lot of passion and care, as this has been, it'll get that audience. *GamesMaster* shows there's still something about the old format that you can't quite get on modern platforms – whether that's a slick set and a professional edit, or a legendary broadcaster saying "wagwan" to his latest victim. Ⓦ

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Beyond Sunset

"The visual design is largely inspired by the art of the synthwave music scene," explains Patrick Pineda, creator of retro-futurist action shooter *Beyond Sunset*. "The aesthetic is both a homage to classic works of cyberpunk fiction and a criticism of the genre. I wanted the game to reflect the time period in which the genre originated. The cyberpunk genre hasn't evolved much since the Cold War – it's been stuck in a rut, rehashing the same tired old themes about artificial intelligence and sentience. The future is here. In our modern dystopia, AIs and algorithmic learning have had a devastating impact on the world. Whether or not androids dream of electric sheep is entirely irrelevant. Whether the androids will make your mom a flat-earther is more relevant. Like *Snow Crash*, the book that inspired *Beyond Sunset*, the game is both a homage and a parody."
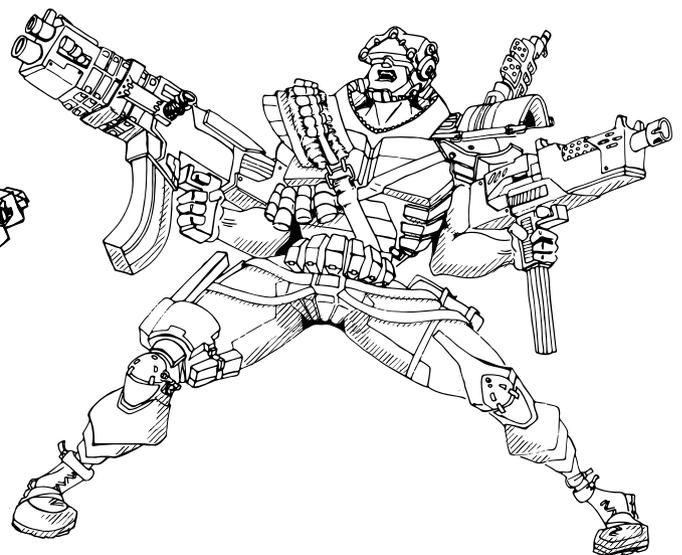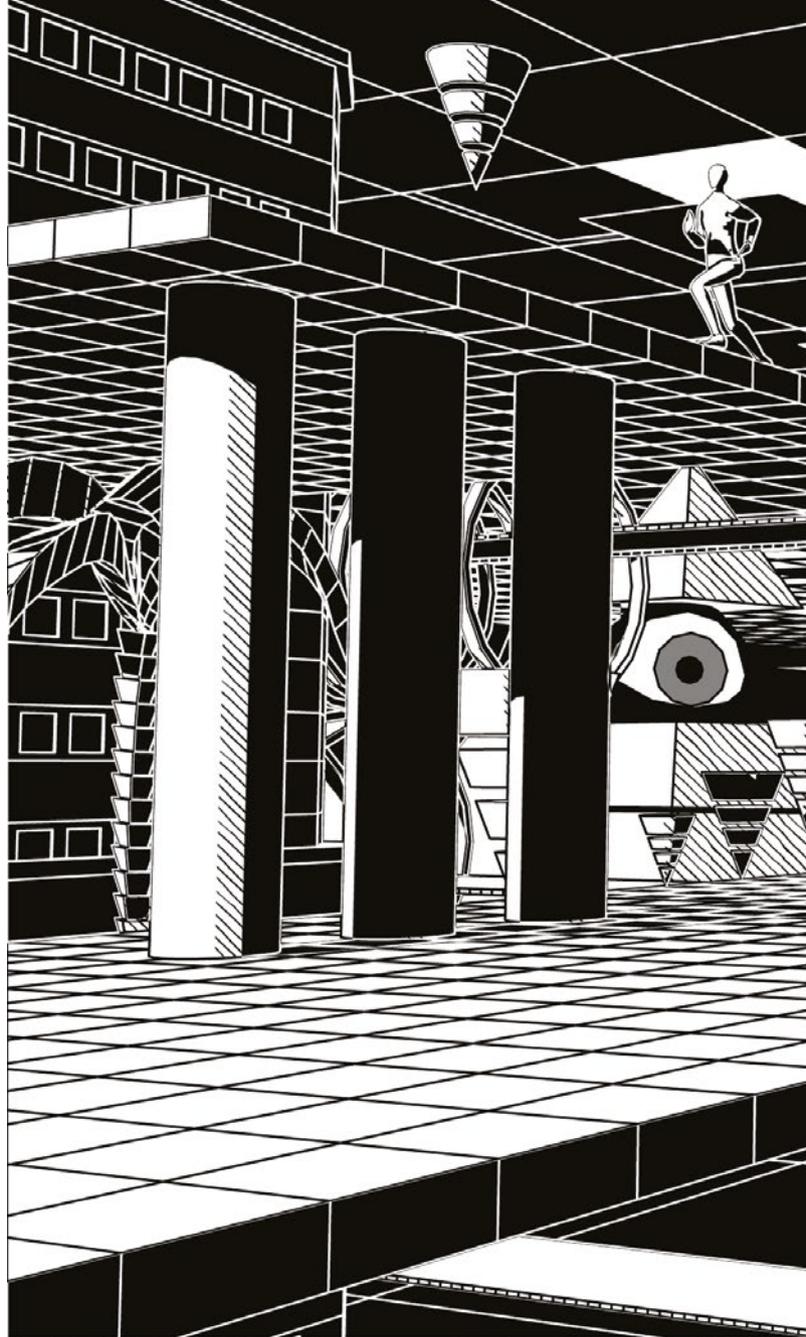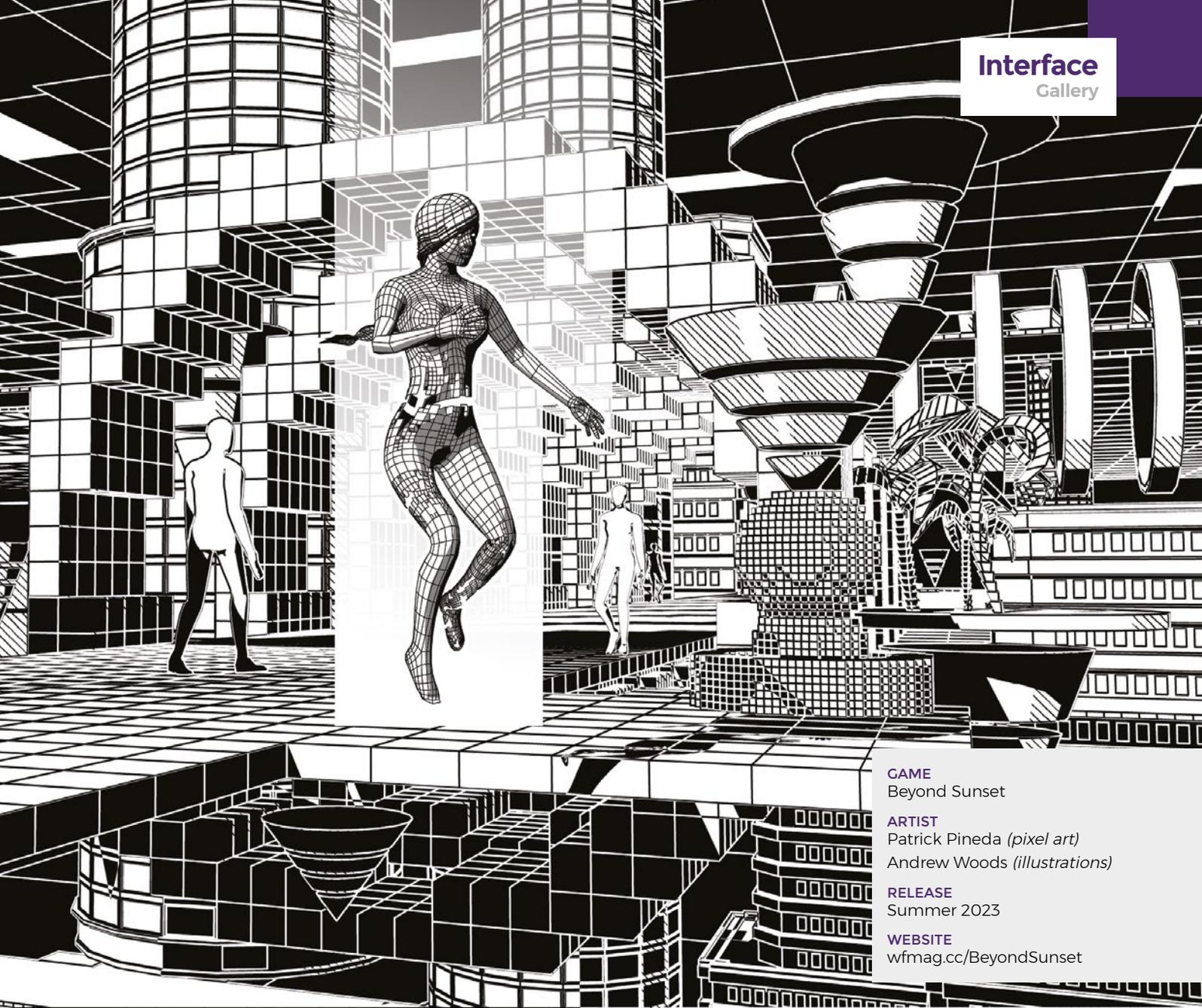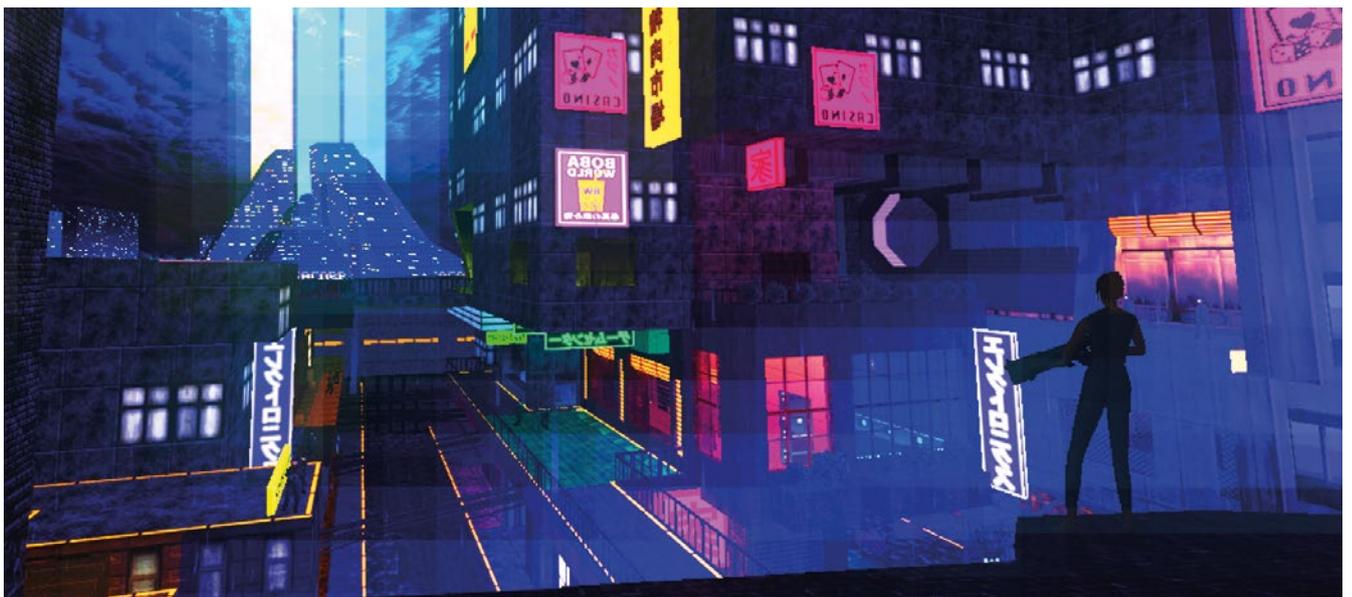
GAME
Beyond Sunset

ARTIST
Patrick Pineda *(pixel art)*
Andrew Woods *(illustrations)*

RELEASE
Summer 2023

WEBSITE
wfmag.cc/BeyondSunset

Surveying the
Serene Skateboarding Scene

We chat to the indie developers who've explored the tranquil side of skateboarding

WRITTEN BY **AARON POTTER**

A sk any real-life skateboarder what they enjoy about the pursuit, and odds are they won't say anything regarding score-chasing or countdown timers. It's a wonder, then, that such metrics tend to be front and centre in a lot of triple-A skateboarding games – it's an unfortunate side-effect of the *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* template being so successful, perhaps. That series was great at presenting the thrill and momentum of skateboarding, sure, as well as introducing the culture to a mass general audience. One aspect it left by the wayside, though, is how soothing the act of stepping onto a board can be. Unless you're competing in a trick contest, organised event – or now even the Olympics – skateboarding is more often solely about one person and their board. Like meditation, everything else just falls away…

It's taken time, but suddenly a small group of indie developers has risen up to finally fill this unique gap. Their intention is to showcase skateboarding's serener side while still making the act of kickflipping and board sliding inherently skilful and fun. One of those is Snowman, a small team of creatives that wanted to portray what it's like to skateboard in a genuine, laid-back manner – similar to their own neighbourhood experiences growing up.

The studio eventually did so by launching *Skate City* on iOS and Android back in 2019.

"We wanted to create an authentic take on skateboarding that captured what we thought it felt like to skate in real life, and bring that to mobile," says Snowman's senior producer Andrew Schimmel. "We wanted to bring the thrill of skating to more people who might have a harder time with some of the more complicated control schemes out there. The sport is naturally exciting, and a lot of people gravitate towards it, but by opening the doors to this world a little wider, we could make something anyone could enjoy."

Taking place entirely on a 2.5D plane, *Skate City* challenges players to skate through various outdoor environments

"We wanted to bring the thrill of skating to more people"

situated all over the world, undertaking bite-sized runs to the tune of a soothing, lo-fi beat soundtrack (this was, we're told, "developed by friends of the development team"). *Skate City* differs from other skateboarding games in that it dedicates just as much focus to establishing a relaxed vibe as it does the need to perform tricks or dodge obstacles. It further instils this sense of 'chill' by mixing in a minimalist pastel art style and picturesque backdrops, both of which truly help you become one with the board. The result? A startlingly tranquil take on skating that manages to reward patience and skill at the same time.

Skate City has since gained a new lease of life since launching on consoles earlier in 2021, but Schimmel suggests it's the game's mobile origins that make it so stress-free. "The environment and mood are things we feel are essential to get right in all of our games as they're often key to standing out as a mobile experience," he says. "We also wanted to put as much emphasis on the ➔

art style and the atmosphere in the game, as setting is often just as important to the feeling of a skate session as the tricks or obstacles are."

Snowman and its development partners at Agens and Room8 looked at the landscape of skateboarding games and noticed something was lacking. You had games that chose to centre on physics-based controls in the effort to simulate reality while, as previously mentioned, at the opposite end of the spectrum, the *Tony Hawk's* franchise had cornered the more arcade-y route. At the time, there didn't seem to be a game that sat slap-bang in the middle.

"There was something missing for us in a lot of the games we tried in the genre,"

says Schimmel. "A feeling of losing time and place in the moment [when] chasing tricks, and the sort of ambient quality you get when you're outside doing that for hours and hours. That usually feels pretty chill, when you really start to appreciate everything around you after your heart has been pumping away." This, combined with *Skate City*'s more approachable controls, ensured that players of all skill levels could efficiently tap into that subtle placidity found in-between skateboarding's more high-wire moments.

While Snowman may have found a way to bring calm to the idea of skating through city streets, 2021 saw another indie gem inspire players by highlighting the cathartic benefits of deck riding. In this instance, heaven was quite literally a half-pipe. Developed by Berlin-based solo developer Paul Schnepf, *The Ramp* is an isometric skateboarding game that strips everything back, encouraging you to find your own rhythm and flow during brief skateboarding sessions. It doesn't need lavish obstacles, complex level layouts, or online leaderboards to hold your attention. Instead, it's about making your own small moments of fun with just you, your board, and a selection of concave ramps.

"Skateboarding never failed to fill me with peace and happiness," says Schnepf of his own experience. Citing *Tony Hawk's*

GET INTO THE SKATING GROOVE

One commonality shared between many serene skateboarding games is the inclusion of a lo-fi soundtrack. Sam Eng describes the music in *Skate Story* as "beautiful and haunting in the right ways", while *The Ramp*'s Paul Schnepf hopes the game's minimalist beats will offer players the encouragement to keep practising. Snowman experimented with faster-paced tracks for *Skate City*, but felt that more sombre tones – composed by Erik Norderval – made a better fit. Andrew Schimmel reveals: "There was a synergy that just kept developing with the chilled-out vibe and easy play which we really loved, so we kept going back to more of that."
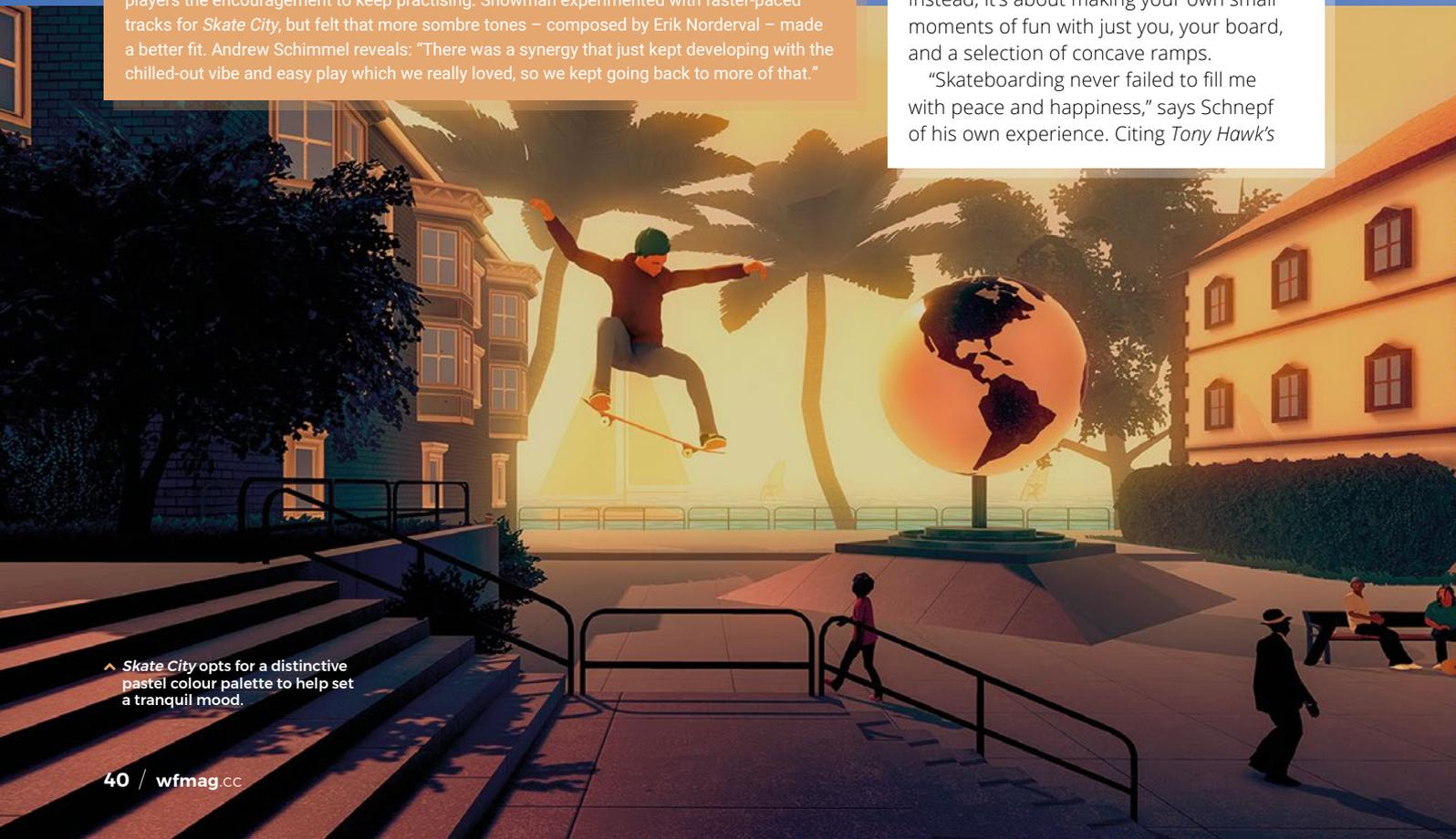
˄ *Skate City* opts for a distinctive pastel colour palette to help set a tranquil mood.

Pro Skater 4 as the main reason he's been ollying for 18 years, with *The Ramp* he wanted to depict the flow of real-life vert skateboarding on half-pipes and bowls. "Most recent skateboarding games are focused on street skateboarding," he explains. "While that's cool as well, I wanted to create a representation of how pumping in a half-pipe actually feels."

This meant stripping *The Ramp* of all the typical gamifying elements that you might expect to see in other, more high-profile skateboarding simulators. You only need to look at the game's official Steam page to see how key an aspect serenity is to the experience Schnepf wanted to provide. 'No unlockable stuff', 'No score, no missions', and 'No guns, explosions, and helicopters' are all listed as main selling points. In this way, *The Ramp* makes a clear effort to distance itself from the rowdy and raucous reputation skateboarding had built up during the so-called 'X-treme' era of the late nineties and early 2000s.

> "Skateboarding in real life feels like playing with a toy most of the time. Everything is very laid-back"

With an emphasis on tactility and providing short bursts of play, Schnepf describes his creation as more of a toy than a game. "Skateboarding in real life also feels like playing with a toy most of the time," he says. "There's usually no scoring involved and everything is very laid-back. I wanted to have a similar vibe going in *The Ramp*." The isometric perspective only adds to this idea, always guaranteeing players a clear view of proceedings as they try to get into the rhythm of performing grips, airwalks, and grinds. It's intentionally toyetic to a wild degree, therefore – so much so that it's not hard to imagine your thumb and forefinger straddling the deck of the board, as opposed to the little person *The Ramp* chooses to depict. ➤

THE HAWK'S SHADOW

All three developers cite Neversoft's genre-defining *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* series as an influence, both in them wanting to make games as well as skateboard. It worked as a good on-ramp, then, but still led each to propel their genre takes in opposing directions. "I remember being a bit disappointed that I wasn't 60 feet in the air, grinding on taxi cabs," says *Skate Story*'s Sam Eng about the first time he stepped onto a board. By placing less importance on chasing scores, there's now every chance that the games discussed will inspire a new generation of skateboarders with more realistic personal goals.
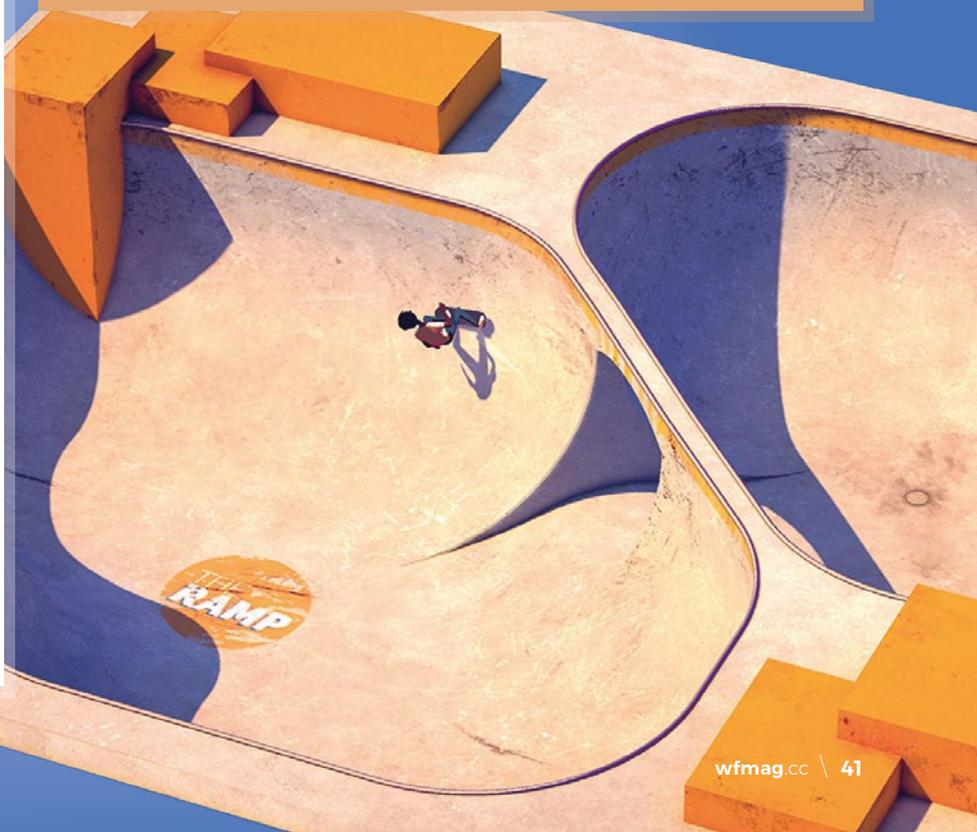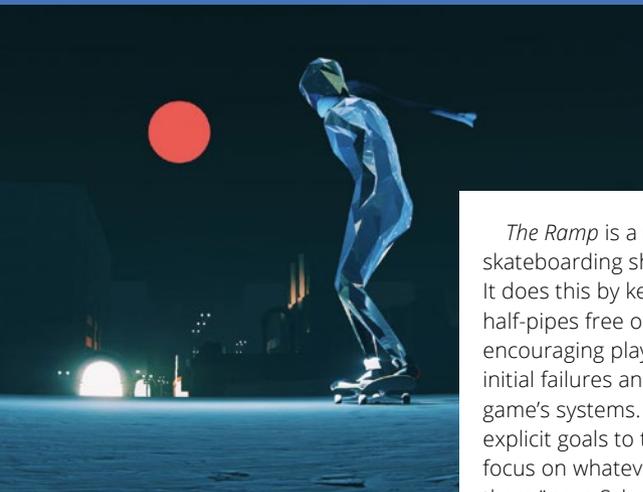
^ *Skate Story*'s glass figure is a metaphor for how shattering the feeling of falling off your board can be.

The Ramp is a reminder that skateboarding should be an act of fun. It does this by keeping its bowls and half-pipes free of any distractions, instead encouraging players to push through any initial failures and experiment with the game's systems. "By not imposing any explicit goals to the player, they're free to focus on whatever challenge feels right for them," says Schnepf. Much like *Skate City*, this serener approach means Schnepf's game appeals to both skaters and non-skaters alike – and the results speak for themselves. "Some people told me they picked up a skateboard for the first time after playing, which is absolutely fantastic!"

If you thought that creating a game centred on skateboarding's quieter nature would mean sticking to realism, think again. If anything, once this explicit intention is set, it frees up indie developers to push the concept away from what one would expect to see from an average skating environment. How do you ask players to keep their cool on a skateboard while still wanting to surprise them? By keeping at least one foot in reality, it turns out.

Skate Story is another one-man skateboarding game scheduled to launch soon. Described by some critics as a mix of "psychedelic and technical", in terms of its controls, the game shares more in common with bigger franchises like *Skate*, in that it rewards your mastery of momentum and how to shift your weight so you can affect the movement of the board. It's very surreal in both its style and presentation, however, lending the game an intentionally atmospheric tone. "I wanted to create a game that portrays my own specific feelings

> **"It's about that battle every skater fights. When you're skating and trying to do something hard"**

about skateboarding," says designer Sam Eng of the intention behind *Skate Story*. "It's some mix of beauty and frustration in a gigantic, dripping mess. My goal is to make a game I can play to remind me of the beauty in skateboarding. *Skate Story* is essentially my fan-art of skateboarding."

You only need look at a single screenshot to see the game's artistic sensibilities. Cast in the unusual role of a human figure made of glass, it'll be your job to skate your way to the centre of the underworld by traversing nine unique layers, each composed of sprawling, fantastical architecture. Such visual elements should make it easy to become transfixed on the events playing out on screen, as *Skate Story* hopes to enter you into the flow state that

WHEN SKATEBOARDING WENT INDIE

Released back in 2014 as a PS Vita exclusive, Roll7's *OlliOlli* is often considered the godfather of modern indie skateboarding games. Everything from its basic control scheme, 2D levels, and simplistic art style went on to prove that a big development budget wasn't needed to create a fun and accurate portrayal of skateboarding. Its expanded sequel, *Welcome to Olliwood*, would later receive critical acclaim. The series looks set to do so once again with new entry *OlliOlli World* (see page six, if you haven't already), with its developers hoping to increase the potential for player expression via the addition of more open environments, new split-path routes, and a fleshed-out story mode.

real-life skaters feel, while still highlighting the dangers the come from learning the sport. "I want *Skate Story* to be about the skateboard as a religious artefact," Eng continues, "and being made of glass and how it feels to fall and smash into a million pieces against the concrete."

Eng's aim is to capture the essence of skating's steep skill curve, and testing the player's ability to pick up those pieces and hop back on the board. "Stress-free skateboarding is what I want," he continues. "But I want people to know truly that yes, skateboarding is difficult. It's difficult for everyone. And it can be so difficult that it can feel utterly hopeless and impossible. But you can do it, so your glass is strengthened through the fire, and it is the most beautiful thing."

With *Skate Story* currently still deep in the midst of development, Eng admits that finding the correct difficulty balance has been one of the toughest issues to solve. Much like *Skate City* and *The Ramp*, the intention is to welcome players in with an 'easy to pick up, tough to master' approach, rendering skateboarding accessible enough so that players will eventually get more invested and pull off tricks that are increasingly complex and challenging. Despite this larger focus on weight distribution and learning through failure, *Skate Story* is still intended to be an unclouded portrayal of what's asked of

a skater. "*Skate Story* is about skating alone at night," Eng says of the chill vibe he plans to evoke. "It's skating as introspection. I want it to be about the relationship between a skater and their board. I want the game to portray a cruise alone in an infinite night. It's about that battle every skater fights. When you're skating and trying to do something hard, you're the only one who can do it."

None of this is to say there's not fun to be had in "pretending you're a superman" whenever you skateboard up a ramp. It's just that, for most people, the first time they lay two feet on a deck couldn't be more different. By focusing on the less chaotic side of the pastime, therefore, the likes of *Skate City*, *Skate Story*, and *The Ramp* serve as a great introduction to those that may want to take it up – in addition to being a fun thing to enjoy and vibe to in isolation. All three games are an expression of skater culture the developers believe isn't too often discussed. They hone directly in on the concept of one person and their board, channelling a specific feeling where, as Schimmel puts it, you "take in everything around you and quieten the mind". ⓦ

⌃ *Skate City*'s Endless Skate mode lets you perform grabs, spins, and more at your own pace.

⌄ *The Ramp*'s isometric view adds to the game's toy-like look and feel.
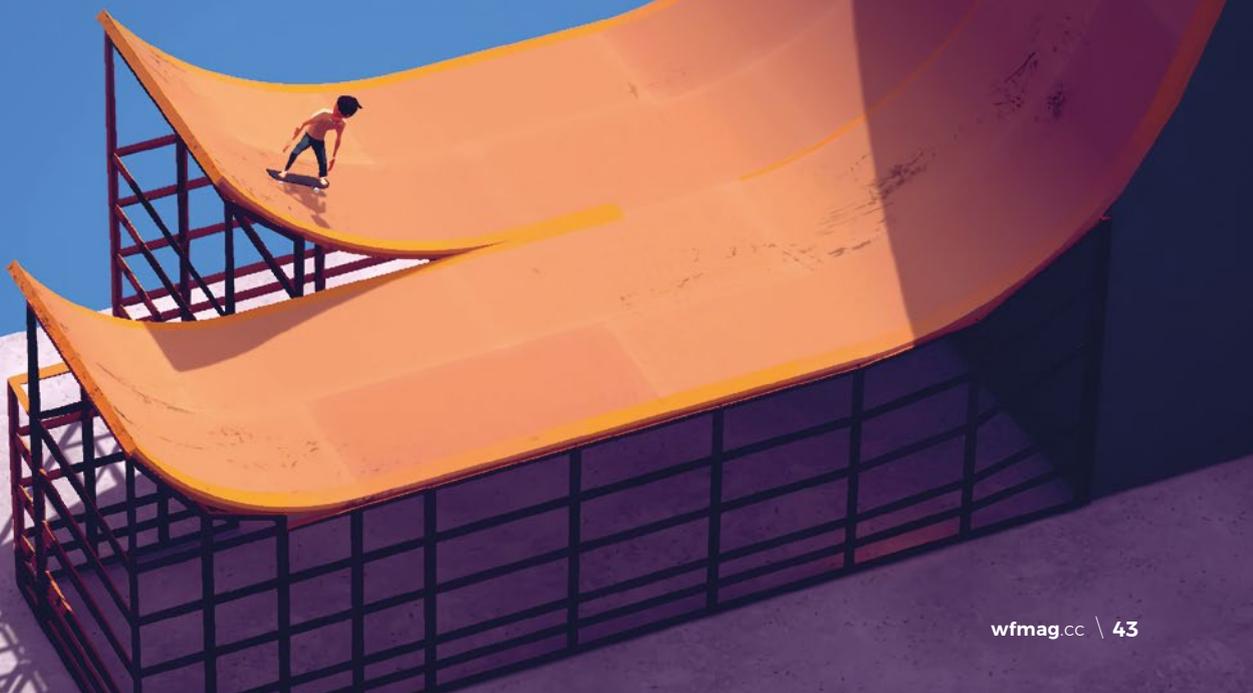
Toolbox

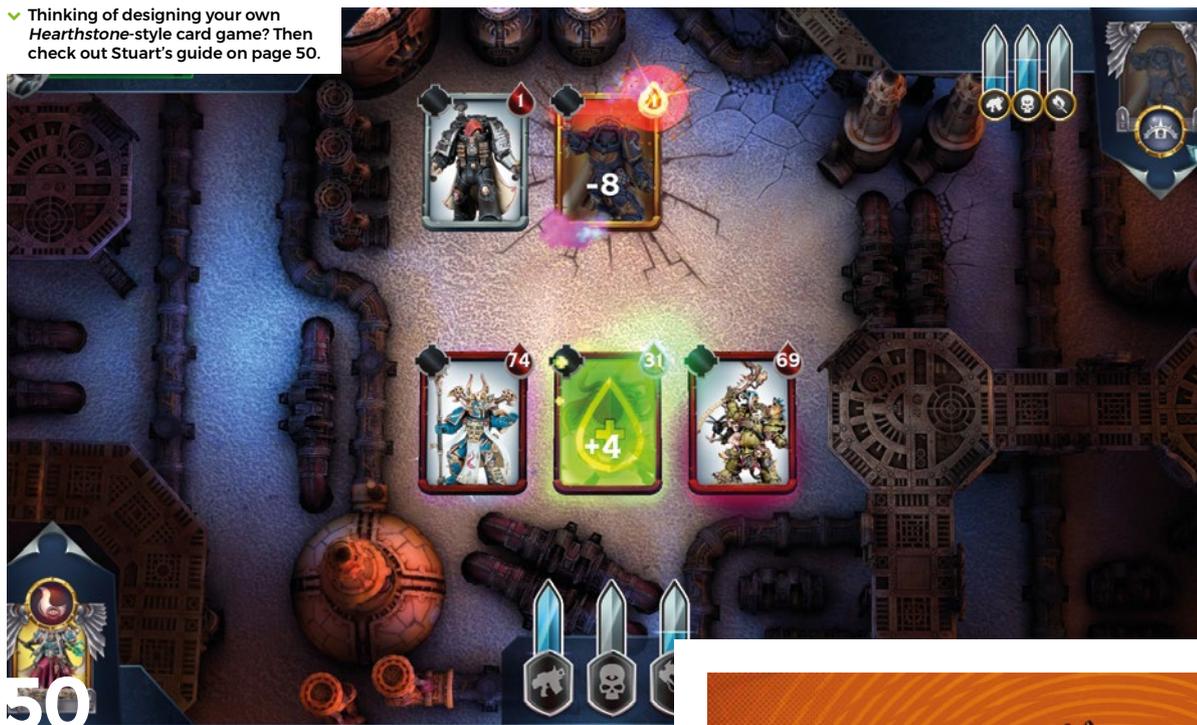## The art, theory, and production of video games

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⌃ Recreate *Skate-or-Die!*'s radical half-pipe minigame on page 64.

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⌃ Make a complete RetroPie console that fits inside a joypad. See page 58.

Thinking of designing your own *Hearthstone*-style card game? Then check out Stuart's guide on page 50.

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Time-loop games like *DEATHLOOP* are having a bit of a moment lately, so Antony breaks down their narrative design on page 56.

Squares or piazzas are an oft-overlooked element in video game cities. Find out how to design one on page 46.

Meet the town square

How to approach the design and history of
the open-air, fascinating hearts of civic life

AUTHOR
KONSTANTINOS DIMOPOULOS

Konstantinos Dimopoulos is a game urbanist and designer combining a PhD in
urban planning with video games. He is the author of the *Virtual Cities* atlas, designs
game cities, and consults on their creation. **game-cities.com**

THE INDOOR SQUARE

When planning for the public areas of a cruise ship, the rooftop meeting space of a modernist apartment house, or a 20th-century mall, the square metaphor can really come in handy. This new space might not be open-air, and could be far from public, but it will serve similar functions and will need to support or encourage similar activities. So, following similar design guidelines and, in certain cases, even aesthetically evoking the square via benches or scaled-down street lamps can lead to great results.

A lthough common in the real world, squares are perplexingly rare in video games. Game designers tend to emphasise roads, buildings, sewers, pubs, and the odd traversable roof, while squares are often neglected. And yet they remain some of the most important social hubs in any city or town – they're bustling nodes of activity; spaces of spectacle where intersecting systems flow.

A BRIEF HISTORY

Defining the town or city square is simple: it's usually an open, public, civic space. In many cases, squares are centrally located, whether they lie at the core of a city or at the busiest crossroads of a neighbourhood. Squares are designed to act as community nodes on a variety of scales, and because communities require space for all types of activities – solitary, common, political, institutional, leisurely, commercial, and so on – squares tend to adapt or shape their spaces and uses accordingly.

> **Fighting on an Italian piazza in *Assassin's Creed 2* offered both unique gameplay possibilities, and some truly impressive backdrops.**

The ancient Athenian agora, for example, was a gathering place for commercial and religious activities, and also provided residents with the opportunity to gather and discuss. Crucially, though, it also served as the place where politics happened; it was the spatial centre of democracy. The subsequent Roman Forum kept many of the agora's functions, added the adjacent buildings of the basilica and theatre, and expanded its activities to also host triumphs and support administration buildings. Following the rise of the Empire, the forum lost its democratic functions, but remained an increasingly important commercial, judicial, and religious node, always situated at the centre of the city.

The Dark and Middle Ages did little to diminish the importance of the square. Instead, it rose as one of the key defining characteristics of urbanism. Featuring cathedrals and often guild-houses or town halls, it was a prominent place commonly used as a marketplace, but also serving as an area to hold religious ceremonies or public executions. Though often stunningly beautiful, the medieval square rarely reached the over-designed spectacle of the Renaissance plaza – a deeply ideological place typically created to celebrate and impose authority or its values.

Modernity kept many of the square's pre-existing characteristics, while also adapting it to the needs of car traffic, contemporary life, capitalist economy, and modern aesthetics. The ideological characteristics of central squares remained strong – compare Times Square and Red Square during the Cold War – and could range from a parliament square meant to hold celebrations, to a neighbourhood space with a park, coffee shop, and a playground.

Squares were never a European peculiarity. China, Iran, Indonesia, Egypt, and major Mesoamerican cultures all had a long history of pre-capitalist squares. Chief among them was Tenochtitlan's main square, which dwarfs the already-huge Mexico City one that took its place. It was a walled space, 500 metres by 500 metres, and functioned as a major ceremonial centre sporting 45 public buildings and the temples where human sacrifices took place.

GAMING SQUARES

In a game, a square could have any set of functions compatible with its setting, and support any new need an imaginary city might demand. It could thus be an administrative centre with a processional space, allow for an orchestra to perform, for people to meet their friends over a glass of wine, or for merchants to sell their wares. It could also sport a maglev station and an area reserved for AI or magical vendors.

Ensuring that game squares are both centres of social life and actually representative of said life is key. City 17's train-station plaza in *Half-Life 2* succinctly showcased just how emphatically familiar activity has collapsed in its dystopia; meanwhile, *Gabriel Knight*'s New Orleanian Jackson Square emphasised the prevalence of voodoo, art, and jazz in that area.

When designing a virtual square, we should consider the functions the square was intended to support; we don't necessarily have to prescribe all the activity that will happen on it. A demonstration can take place on a plaza created to celebrate the power of authority, for example. Similarly, as history moves on, a square's initial intended use may change, as we

see when modern people play drinking games on religious, possibly once-sacred places. Squares are places meant for the wider public, and thus are places to be contested and appropriated.

Ideological and political power struggles influence the politically significant landmarks commonly located on squares. Often a temple or an institutionally important building is emphasised by having a square in front or around it. The open space adds to the spectacle, and often attracts it. The iconic sculpted fountain of Fontana di Trevi, for instance, completely dominates the Piazza di Trevi, which only exists to showcase it and is now a major tourist spot. On the other hand, the column of Paris's Place Vendôme, tellingly also previously known as Place Louis-le-Grand but also Place Internationale, is characteristic. Revolutionaries destroyed it during the days of the Paris Commune, only for it to be rebuilt during Adolphe Thiers' counter-revolutionary terror.

Before it can be contested though, a square has to be designed. Depending on its intended functions and location, said design and style can vary wildly. The square can be covered in earth or concrete. It can also be paved or feature distinct sub-areas that combine earth, park space, or gravel. It may be separated in specific areas, including a playground, a fountain, and so on. It can be anything from cosy to imposing in size, and from oblong to circular in shape. It may be designed for a specific class or group or even at a specific function like, say, a carnival or a procession. It can feature fountains, benches, stalls, street lights, and palm trees, or, as in *Majora's Mask*, an imposing clock tower. ⓦ
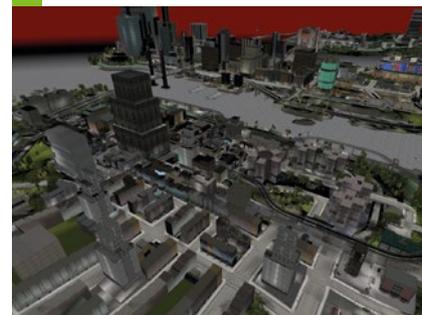
READ THIS

For an interesting read on the principles guiding designing successful neighbourhood squares, here's a rather extensive and richly illustrated text: **wfmag.cc/be-square**.

The principles of game design

What's it like to be credited as the designer of a game you never made? Howard found out this month...

AUTHOR
HOWARD SCOTT WARSHAW

Howard is a video game pioneer who authored several of Atari's most famous and infamous titles. His new book, *Once Upon Atari: How I Made History by Killing an Industry*, is out now. **onceuponatari.com**

E very new medium poses a challenge: what can I do that is unique to this medium? What's the killer app? Initially, no one knows. That's why I believe the first successful products in any new medium are remakes of hits from prior media. Many early digital devices were simply reincarnations of their analogue predecessors. In the field of entertainment, video games are the digital progeny of their analogue ancestors: pinball machines. Video games are very different from pinball machines, but they share one thing that didn't change at all: score.

Score is important, because score is a feedback mechanism. Feedback is what human beings seek in virtually all their endeavours; we want to know how we're doing compared to others (and ourselves). That's one of the best things about sports and games. Unlike much of life, they give clear and unambiguous feedback through score.

There are two kinds of scores that are important to video gamers: the first is game score, because you need to know how you're doing at any point in time. The other is credit score, so you know whether or not you can afford to purchase the next game to set more scores. But credit isn't only for buying video games. When I score well in a game, I want credit for the effort. I want my progress marked, and I also want it rewarded... preferably with tangible prizes and status. In pinball, high scores get paid off with game credits. Video games reimagined this same vehicle with extra lives. Video games also have high-score boards to log players' achievements. It won't surprise you to know that credit is also important to video game developers.

Programmers getting credit for their work was a significant issue back in the day. Atari was staunchly against crediting programmers. Activision and Imagic made a point of flaunting credit for their game makers (this accounted for a number of inter-company migrations). These days it's standard practice to credit all involved in a game's development, so you'd think that's settled. Au contraire! Recently, I was involved in an interesting and unexpected credit conundrum...

You may have heard of the Atari XP offering: the company recently advertised three new

Yars' Return: a later fan-made ROM hack, and categorically not a proper sequel designed by Howard Scott Warshaw.
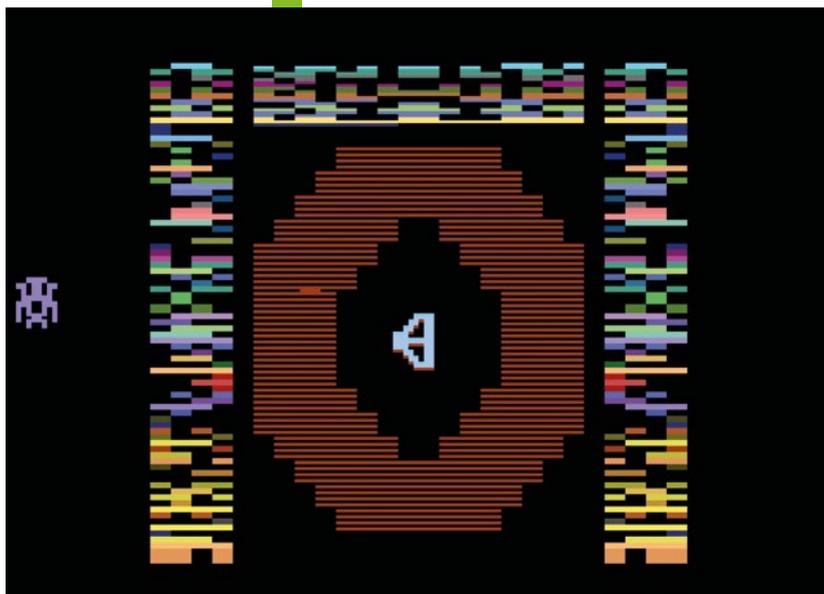
▲ *Aquaventure* **is a previously unreleased Atari game of uncertain origin; what we do know is that Howard didn't design it.**

cartridges for the 2600 and compatible systems. They claimed these games were originally set for release in 1983 but never saw the light of day. Atari XP has picked them back up, repackaged them, and now limited editions are available. That sounds like a cool thing, except... Suddenly I started getting deluged with queries about games I supposedly had done but not released. Especially a game called *Yars' Return*, an alleged sequel to my own *Yars' Revenge*.

On looking at the website where the games were offered, I saw the three titles: *Saboteur*, *Yars' Return*, and *Aquaventure*. What I found most interesting was that each game had a "Designed by" credit, and all three were attributed to the same person... *me!* I found this rather odd, since I'm familiar with my game designs and this did not jibe with my memory. *Saboteur* was the only one of the three I claim as my own, having written this game virtually in its entirety. It was missing only my Easter eggs signatures and a tweak or two. Unfortunately, a comedy of mishaps delayed it, then the Video Game Crash crashed everything, causing Atari and I to begin occupying dissimilar space/time co-ordinates. Nonetheless, I feel my attribution as designer is valid for this game.

Not so much for *Yars' Return*. Though I had *contemplated* a sequel to *Yars' Revenge*, I progressed only to the point of a basic design, then I shelved it. There was no *Yars* sequel planned for 1983 and I didn't write one. *Yars' Return* was Curt Vendel's hack of my original game, and he deserves the credit for it. I had nothing to do with it.

And *Aquaventure* is something I've never heard of or had anything to do with. The idea that I'm the designer on it is absurd to me. Anyone who

reads my *Once Upon Atari* knows this. I reached out to Atari through their website, but I received only automated responses assuring me a ticket had been opened. I heard nothing more.

Classic gamers the world over sought me out to verify the info on the Atari XP website. How can I leave this alone? I can't. So I jump onto AtariAge to relate the truth of this situation. I wrote a post clarifying my lack of involvement with most of their offerings and left it at that.

As the first Atari programmer to be named in the packaging of an Atari title, I can assure you it's lovely to be acknowledged for the work I've done. It's quite another thing, however, to be credited for having done work performed by others. This is not lovely in my opinion. I felt it was crucial to straighten out this misattribution and try to bring light to the people who actually had created the other games. I did what I could.

To their credit, Atari did ultimately respond. They heard the hubbub and reached out to me. They apologised for the misunderstanding, acknowledged my concerns, and updated the website. As of this writing, *Saboteur* is correctly attributed to me, and the others are now unattributed. Halfway there. I'm hopeful the responsible parties will get the notoriety they deserve.

Seeing someone else get the credit for work I've done really sucks. Getting the credit for work I didn't do also sucks, but in a different way. Still, I shouted into the vast credit abyss and got an echo, leaving things not perfect, but significantly more accurate than I found them. Score! Ⓦ

> **"Getting the credit for work I didn't do sucks, but in a different way"**

▲ **An unreleased game that definitely was designed by Howard: the hectic shooter,** *Saboteur.*

Designing your own card game

Even though technology allows us to create any game we can imagine, people continue to make and play card games. What makes them so popular?

AUTHOR
STUART MAINE

Stuart Maine has been a designer for 24 years, across PC, console, and mobile. He helped set up Well Played Games and is working on an unannounced title.

F rom *Inscryption* to *Slay the Spire*, from *Solitaire* to *Hearthstone*, card games encompass a huge range of gameplay styles and themes for audiences across pretty much every platform. Not bad for a genre invented hundreds of years ago, particularly when tools like Unreal allow developers to create, say, a first-person shooter with just a few clicks. So what is it about card games that keeps them so popular with both players and developers?

We'll discuss audiences later, but from a developer perspective, card games are ideal for prototyping and proving out ideas, as relatively compact projects for lone creators or small teams, or for simply stretching your game design muscles. This is because card games – like board games – offer a lot of gameplay from relatively few elements. In fact, even more than board games, card games 'just' revolve around coming up with some gameplay rules and then teaching players how each of the cards they're holding will affect the game's current state.

Card games are also popular with developers precisely because everything revolves around the cards and the area you play them onto, meaning you can avoid the complexities of animating characters, designing 3D levels, creating real-time cutscenes, and so on. Of course, the risk here is that because they're so stripped back, card games leave nowhere to hide – if your core gameplay is confusing, or worse, boring, then you can't rely on fancy bells and whistles to entertain players.

WHAT IS A CARD GAME?

If we can get technical for a moment, from a design point of view, card games are simply a collection of tokens, some rules, and some systems. Tokens are elements the player manipulates to play the game, with each representing objects ("I summon Charizard"), actions ("I use Dropkick"), or resources ("I gain three mana"). We call these tokens 'cards' because that word provides players with a handy mental shortcut for how they'll act in the game

⌄ *Paperback* demonstrates how cards can give you a limited number of options – in this case letters – to consider each turn from a much larger pool.

(shuffling and dealing them, holding a hand of them, playing or discarding them, etc.), but they could just as easily be represented as coins or leaves. Next, you have rules, which dictate things like how and when you can play cards, and how you win or lose the game. Finally, systems come into effect when you play a card, adding or subtracting resources or score, inflicting damage or any other gameplay element you can imagine and create.

Let's dig a little deeper into the elements you have to play with when creating a card game and how each might affect your gameplay:

- Obviously cards are your primary tool, encompassing both all the possible cards in the game and the ones currently in the player's collection (as players may not start with them all, unlocking more over time). We'll discuss card design shortly.

- Rather than taking all their cards into the gameplay, players tend to create smaller decks, potentially with restrictions on the cards these can or can't include. The number of cards in a deck and how many duplicate cards are allowed helps dictate how random or tactical your game feels, because it affects how likely players are to draw the card they want (smaller decks and more duplicates = greater chance of getting any given card).

- Once in game, players draw cards from their deck, giving them a hand to play with.

This again affects your gameplay as too large a hand overwhelms you with options, while too small means gameplay might as well be automatic (not that there's anything wrong with that, but it should be a creative decision rather than a side effect of not giving players enough choices). Consider how many cards players will draw each turn, if there's a penalty when their deck runs out of cards to draw or if they simply reshuffle it, and whether players keep cards they don't play from turn to turn.

- There may be a cost to play the cards in your hand. This can simply be the 'opportunity cost' of having to choose card A or card B, or there can be an 'energy' cost for each card played, allowing you to make more powerful cards more expensive to play. Energy also allows you to control the pace of battles by increasing the flow of it over time. You can even have cards that require other cards to already be in play before they can be used, such as *Yu-Gi-Oh! Duel Links*' sacrifice mechanic. ➡

ACCESSIBLE INTERACTION

Consider how players 'play' the cards in your game alongside the platforms you plan to release it on. Devices with touchscreens make it fun to drag cards into play, which is fine with a mouse but not ideal on console. Alternatively, you could map a button to each card in your hand, influencing how many cards you deal players each turn. Or perhaps introduce something more experimental, such as a timing or dexterity element to selecting cards or their target – though remembering that the card game audience may not be expecting to have their 'twitch skills' tested.

▲ *Magic: The Gathering* **manages its incredible longevity by having cards only featuring a few stats, with all the complexity coming from regularly added 'keywords'.**

LONG-TERM PROGRESSION

Once you've nailed fun core gameplay, you can combine this with your theme and audience to look at what keeps players coming back over multiple sessions. Gradually unlocking new cards can increase the game's 'width' by introducing new strategies and combos, plus you can introduce modifiers and new win conditions. Meanwhile, 'depth' can be added by giving players greater control, such as modifying cards, more interaction with their opponent's cards or the game board, or even manually triggered abilities. Games like *The Solitaire Conspiracy* mix things up by including characters, and keep players engaged through an unfolding narrative.

● Another limit on playing cards can be the play space you put them on, with most card games using a grid for readability and to prevent gameplay from becoming unwieldy due to too many cards being in play. The size and shape of your grid also allows you to include positioning elements if you like, such as cards protecting those behind them or buffing ones adjacent to them.

So we have a collection of cards to make decks from; we draw hands of cards from that deck and potentially need to pay energy to play those cards to some sort of grid. Then there are rules which control how your game is played. For instance, how do players win? Does their opponent have a 'life' total they attack by playing cards? Do they need to reach a preset score, or simply empty their deck, like *Solitaire*? Similarly, how do they lose? Then look at how your gameplay is structured – does the player take an entire turn (perhaps with their opponent using cards to interrupt), or do the player and their opponent alternate playing one card at a time? Or do you look for more 'video game only'

options like being able to play a card every X seconds, which would be fiddly on a tabletop but is easy to enforce in a digital experience?

CARD DESIGN

A useful way to consider the cards themselves is as 'nouns' and 'verbs'. Nouns are cards representing people, places, and things, which often persist in the play space once you've placed them until they're destroyed. For instance, *Magic: The Gathering* has noun cards ranging from a single flower all the way up to entire islands. Verb cards are actions that you tend to play for an immediate effect before discarding the card. For example, these include a fireball spell, a punch, or a dodge. Because these cards are 'one and done', they're ideal for playing to interrupt an opponent, keeping the waiting player involved in the action when it's not their turn.

In either case, cards are the critical element of your gameplay, with the fun coming from looking at your available options (the cards in your hand) and deciding what to do now, later, or not at all. If you build your own deck, there's also the element of trying to predict how likely you are to

> **"A useful way to consider the cards themselves is as 'nouns' and 'verbs'"**

GAME	CANVAS RULE	EXAMPLE
RED	HIGHEST CARD	
ORANGE	CARDS OF ONE NUMBER	
YELLOW	CARDS OF ONE COLOR	
GREEN	EVEN CARDS	
BLUE	CARDS OF ALL DIFFERENT COLORS	
INDIGO	CARDS THAT FORM A RUN (I.E. 4 5 6)	
VIOLET	CARDS BELOW 4	

⌃ **Asmadi Games' Red7 proves how many tricky decisions you can force players into with just a combination of a few numbers and colours on cards.**

draw a specific card and whether to plan for it, plus evaluating your opponent's likely strategy given the current game state. Juggling each of these elements is what gives card games their appeal – the situation is always changing and there's always an element of chance from drawing cards, but each turn is self-contained enough to feel like a puzzle you can solve.

DO YOUR RESEARCH

As with any project, you should do your research before jumping in. Study both digital and physical games, and because they're so stripped back, card games are easy to break down into mechanics that you can watch interacting. Consider what each card represents in the game, along with whether it's always obvious where and when to play them, if cards provide multiple options (such as being summoned to the grid or used to buff an existing card), and if there are space or energy limits on playing them. Also, think about the larger state of the game – does every move work towards victory or do you sometimes have to take a short-term hit for long-term gains? Is it clear if you're winning or losing, or is this obfuscated (for excitement or to prevent losing players from quitting)? And what provides the challenge in the game? Is it an opponent (which could be human or AI), or is it more of a puzzle that you're trying to complete in an optimum way?

⌃ **Despite the pretty 3D components, *Street Fighter: The Miniatures Game* is driven by its cards, using them for movement, chaining attacks, and avoiding damage.**

You can also look at the visual and audio feedback the game's providing, asking whether it's simply acknowledging 'you're playing a card game' as poker does, or if it's presenting a coherent world that you happen to be interacting with through cards (for example, the way your cards trigger a warrior's attacks in *Slay the Spire*). One of the elements that makes card games so handy for prototyping ideas is that you don't need to worry what each card represents at the start – it can simply have numbers, symbols, and rules text – making them quick to change and iterate. But considering your game's theme can help inspire gameplay ideas, such as cards representing acceleration, braking, and stunts in a racing-themed game, or including a resource called exhaustion in a sword fighting game.

WHAT ARE YOU FIGHTING?

Again, your game needs something to play against. Human players are exciting and unpredictable, but this puts you into a complex world of multiplayer technology, cheat prevention, and so on, so is usually reserved for teams of developers. Solo projects can look at a simple goal to win, such as *Solitaire*'s clearing your deck, or reaching some target before your deck runs out. Alternatively, you can include a simple AI to battle against, with an algorithm calculating which of the cards it's currently holding has the highest 'score' (with cards that advance it towards winning scoring high and those that would help its opponent, low).

You also need to consider how long you want games to be, with players either taking ➡

LESSONS FROM MAGIC

In 2016, designer Mark Rosewater gave a Game Developers Conference talk called '*Magic: the Gathering: Twenty Years, Twenty Lessons Learned*', which provides fascinating insights into successful and failed experiments the *Magic* team have tried over the game's many expansions. Of particular note: ensuring the player's having fun with the game, and that you aren't just doing something because it's an interesting design challenge for you. Another common design trap he mentions is not aligning what players want to do with what the game actually rewards. You can watch the talk here: **wfmag.cc/gdc-magic**.

⌄ *Inscryption* **runs on its mysterious, shifting narrative as much as the card gameplay, but includes some neat – and thematically appropriate – mechanics around sacrificing creatures.**

^ *Signs of the Sojourner* takes the concept of 'battles' in a different direction, using abstract cards to drive conversations between an eclectic cast of characters.

^ **The Transformers card game made clever use of its licence by flipping cards over to transform characters between two forms with different stats and abilities.**

on epic battles or quick-fire duels. This plays into considering how random you want your gameplay to feel, because only young players want a long game whose winner is decided randomly. All card games have an element of chance, so you should consider if you want more than this. See my article on chance in games in issue 25 (**wfmag.cc/25**) for more on the subject, but in short, games can feel frustrating if too many elements are out of your control.

PRACTICAL TOOLS

There are two phases to creating a card game: prototyping and making an actual game. Prototypes can be made in tools like Tabletop Simulator, Strange Eons, or by writing on pieces of paper and sliding them into plastic card sleeves. This means it's quick to adjust your cards, most likely beginning with sweeping changes before progressing to fine adjustments once you have a game you like. However, tools like these don't impose any rules on the game or have any of the systems in place to adjust a player's life total, for example. You'll have to do all those things by hand for your playtesters, as if you're acting as the computer.

Once you progress to making a game, you'll be able to have it prevent illegal moves, track if someone has won or lost, remove 'dead' cards, and so on. Again, there are several options here, including **boardgame.io** or Dulst, plus there are 'making card game' video tutorials for Unity, while Unreal has the CCG Toolkit available. But again, you should focus on prototyping strong gameplay before worrying about making a full game.

> **"Making a card game is relatively easy; making a good one is hard"**

SUMMING UP

Making a card game is relatively easy; making a good one is hard. Your time will be spent on ensuring it's obvious what players need to do to win, can see what's standing in their way, and that there are multiple ways for them to approach this challenge. A game with the right balance of chance versus skill, where, win or lose, players can see how they can do better next time.

Sure, achieving compelling gameplay is as tricky with a card game as it is in any genre, but it all comes down to a design challenge – your blockers aren't content, like levels, story, art, and audio, nor will you have to worry about esoteric technology demands.

Once you've designed a strong card game, you could flesh it out and release it, include it as a minigame inside a larger project (like *The Witcher*'s *GWENT*), or use it to showcase your design skills when applying for a job. Even if you just file it away with some notes on the decisions you made and why, making the game will have taken you through the core process of game design – stripping away the 'making content' part to focus on compelling gameplay, which is an essential skill for any creator. ⓦ

^ **The Solitaire Conspiracy demonstrates how even classic card games can be given a twist, along with introducing a narrative to provide another layer of motivation.**

CONSIDER YOUR AUDIENCE

Think about who you're aiming your game at from the beginning, because while you might have to adjust it once you start playtesting, considering your audience can help narrow the seemingly infinite number of gameplay options available to you. For 'casual' players, you probably want cards to look and act like physical cards to make your game as accessible as possible, but 'gamers' can accept cards that change on the fly (after all, one of the advantages of digital cards is they can alter what's shown on them in real time and even have more than two 'sides').

EXAMPLES

Rather than simply presenting a list of the most successful games out there, I thought it would be more useful to look at a selection of card games that have an interesting element to their core gameplay, structure, or theme. It's worth considering each of these games through the lens of its target audience – a feature that makes sense to one group of players could prove disastrous to another.

⌃ Creatures of Aether

An evolution of *Final Fantasy*'s *Triple Triad* card game, here each card represents a creature with stats that battle the four cards around it, hopefully taking over those cards and swapping them to your colour. This is complicated by various elements, giving the gameplay a puzzle-game feel. The dungeons that you clear room by room are also fun, allowing you to edit your deck as you press on for prizes.
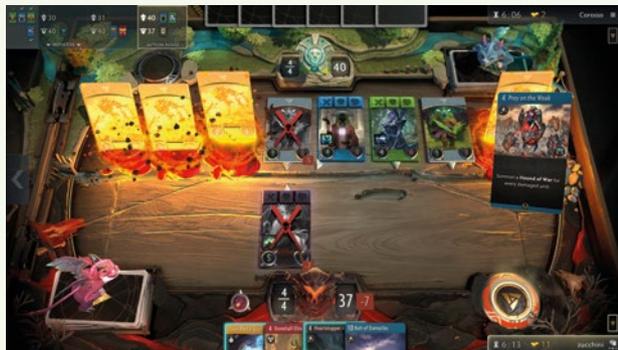
⌃ Artifact

You can read a lot of opinions on why Valve's game flopped and was abandoned, but it's interesting to study its various elements and consider why each works independently but fails to cohere into a solid experience. One of the complaints from the game's 'hardcore' players was that gameplay is too random, but it's not actually that open to chance, it's just more chance-driven than the game's particular audience wanted.

Warhammer Combat Cards

I worked on this game based on Games Workshop's old Top Trumps-style Combat Cards. We wanted to evolve their concept of 'cards have stats representing how they fight in the tabletop wargame' while keeping gameplay interesting but accessible. As a result, there are only three action choices to make each turn, but you have to judge which helps you the most without setting your opponent up to win.

Shadowverse

Prototyped with paper first, *Shadowverse* is a CCG (Collectible Card Game) that makes most of its money from a Japanese audience.
It presents a wide range of characters to play, each of which forces you to learn how to best use their powers through a long story segment. Though a complex, sprawling game, it's worth studying all the different mechanics the game extracts from a simple deck of cards.

⌃ Miracle Merchant

With a fun art style, cards represent ingredients that you use to create potions and satisfy customer requests, gambling which 'wrong' cards you can afford to include to get to cards further down that pile. While the gameplay can be highly chance-driven, each run is short enough that you can just go again, looking for that perfect blend of making the correct decisions with the right cards appearing.


⌃ Slay the Spire

A roguelike where you choose how to evolve an initially basic deck as you push deeper into each run, *Slay the Spire* is a masterclass in combining elements to encourage you to try and solve each turn. But because you want runs to go on as long as possible, you also need to think about the bigger picture, sometimes taking hits now to gamble on doing better later.

Groundhog Play

Why has the unique nature of time–loop stories captured devs' imaginations, and what challenges and opportunities do they present?
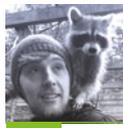
AUTHOR
ANTONY DE FAULT

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At its core, even defining what is and isn't a time-loop game is difficult, but let's try. "The time-loop game is any game where, upon death or running out of time etc., both the game world and the player are returned to an earlier moment from which they relive the experience with the benefit of foreknowledge", perhaps. Far from being satisfactory, this makes *Halo* mechanically a time-loop game. End me with a Covenant sniper rifle, and I am reset to the last 'Checkpoint'. There, I'm at an earlier point in time, destined to live/die repeatedly until I figure out which rock that damn sniper is behind so I can shoot them first. Could adjusting my definition to include a fixed starting point, such as always waking up by the campfire in *Outer Wilds* at the exact same point in time, help? Be careful, since this would still include

roguelikes such as *FTL* or *Hades*, and it's also easy to imagine a time-looping game where the player can, through the loops, unlock new 'starting points' in the game world's time and space.

TO LOOP, OR NOT TO LOOP?

Games such as these might more accurately be "a game wherein the player and game world are returned to an earlier point in time upon running out the clock or death, *but the fiction remains aware of events in those discarded timelines*". Where I stand, it seems this would satisfy just about any existing time-loop media. *Every Day the Same Dream*, *Groundhog Day*, and *Russian Doll* would be boring if there wasn't an awareness of the time-loop and ability to remember what happened in previous loops: Bill Murray would, just like everyone else in that town, repeat the same actions endlessly. Factor in player agency in video games, though, and you create a new possibility, where time loops back on itself and every character is totally unaware, but the player remembers the discarded timelines and can use their awareness to foresee threats and try new things. Is it possible, then, that one could view the majority of video games as bizarre bastardisations of the time-loop format wherein nobody but the player perceives the world resetting?

Intrinsically, this produces a psychic disconnect between player and character, since the player is almost always better informed than the character is. Cyclic games will naturally emerge then, closing the player-to-character gap, as we try to innovate in narrative design and preserve the player's delicate suspension of disbelief, wherein some element of the fiction, usually the player character, is aware of the cut-short timelines. And so we arrive at *DEATHLOOP* and *The Forgotten*

▼ 2019 even saw the release of a canonical sequel to *Groundhog Day* in a VR time-loop game subtitled *Like Father Like Son*.

DEATHLOOP: **looping action, but surprisingly straightforward narrative design.**

City, but there's *still* distinctions to be made. Its setting may be cyclical, but *DEATHLOOP* does not feature looping in its narrative mechanics. Beyond combat/exploration, the actual tale of Colt and Julianna at the heart of *DEATHLOOP* does not repeat, as both recall the events of the previous loops. This series of conversations progresses only ever forwards, and since the player can't make any narrative decisions in the game, they are not able to use any prescient knowledge to manipulate the narrative mechanically.

VISIONS OF THE FUTURE

Writer Nick Pearce sits on the other side of this divide with *The Forgotten City*. To this end he features explicit narrative decision-making heavily, using a dialogue framework inherited from *Skyrim*, and almost all of his characters have no knowledge of the time-loop. Say something anachronous, and it leads to new story and dialogue branches that only reveal themselves on subsequent loops. If the player likes, similar to Bill Murray's shortcut-like manipulation of those around him in *Groundhog Day*, they're able to awaken and immediately say exactly the right things to convince *City*'s loveliest character, Galerius, to prevent several imminent catastrophes. That very same loop, you may be relieved of a significant amount of gold by a conman, then in the next loop new dialogue options appear, allowing the savvy player to take advantage of his time-reset obliviousness and

con him right back, deliciously weaponising his own previous phrasing against him.

Yet even beyond what appears in *City*, the looping story format seems to afford us new opportunities. Is it possible to use time-looping to create uniquely isolated characters, as the only people able to perceive the loop, or could we use it to treat people as 'levels' to be 'solved'? Existing free from always having individual conversations be 'done in one', we can perhaps create characters who are much harder to 'navigate'; more obstinate, or more complex.

It also creates challenges: *The Forgotten City* can't help but reintroduce cognitive distance between the player and their character when the writer, understandably, can't keep up with the breadth of volume of potential things the player may want to say to each character; it becomes slightly restrictive in the final act, as dialogue options about 'looped' revelations which we feel should be present are absent.

I believe time-looping games exist on a spectrum. It could be argued that time-looping play of some sort is present in many or even most games, even though the fiction of a time-loop isn't. Not much further along the spectrum sit games whose fictions contain a looping nature, although this doesn't necessarily mean that all aspects of gameplay feature looping. At the far end, there could be games where every factor is intrinsically cyclic, but it's beyond me to say if that yet exists. I think not. ⓦ

> **"Time-looping play of some sort is present in many or even all games"**

DISSONANCE? WHAT DISSONANCE?

To reconcile the fact that, due to failure and retrying, the player often knows about events coming up in games that their character is oblivious to, player effort is often expended to role-play not having that knowledge. But this is still then undermined by in-game challenges such as 'bosses' which you are intended to fail at a few times, gaining foresight, before you succeed. Could this be intertwined with the historic propensity for mute, 'blank slate' protagonists in games? Much easier to overlook a disconnect between player and character when the character never draws attention to themselves.

Make a complete RetroPie console in a joypad

Make a compact device capable of playing all kinds of retro games – all packed into one controller

AUTHOR
RYAN LAMBIE

Ryan is the editor of Wireframe magazine, the author of *The Geek's Guide to SF Cinema*, and owner of far too many Sega Mega Drive games.

The likes of Nintendo and Sega may have got our nostalgia synapses humming with their miniature plug-and-play consoles, but how about an entire RetroPie device that fits snugly into a SNES-style controller? Follow the instructions here, and you'll have a complete, self-contained system capable of playing a wealth of retro games. It'll connect to your TV via HDMI, will charge using a micro USB port, and can be made for a relatively paltry sum.

A version of this consolised controller previously appeared in our sister publication, The MagPi – issue 42, to be precise – but here we're updating things a bit by adding the new Raspberry Pi Zero 2 W into the mix. The new Raspberry Pi Zero 2 provides a major upgrade over the one used in that earlier guide: not only is it more powerful, allowing you to emulate a greater range of systems and games, but its WiFi connectivity allows you to add ROMs remotely. This is pretty handy since it saves having to open up the controller to get at the SD card.

Our project will make use of an affordable SNES-style USB controller, which, with a bit of modification, is large enough inside to fit in all the tech we need to run RetroPie: the Raspberry Pi Zero 2, a PowerBoost 500C power supply board, and a 500mAh LiPo battery.

The latter means you can simply charge the device up with a standard 5 V charger. For a full list of the bits you'll need, check out the box on the opposite page.

SET UP YOUR RASPBERRY PI

Before we start soldering, the first job is to install RetroPie on the Raspberry Pi Zero 2. To do this, you'll need to download a copy of RetroPie from **retropie.org.uk** – see the box on page 62 for details. The Raspberry Pi Zero 2 W doesn't have a specific version of RetroPie ready at the time

▼ **Figure 1:** Most of the struts and screw posts you can see here will need to be removed so we can fit everything inside the joypad.

The parts you'll need for this project.

of writing, but that may have changed by the time this issue hits newsstands – keep an eye on RetroPie's website for updates.

Once RetroPie's installed, you'll then need to plug a keyboard into the Raspberry Pi and connect the device to your wireless network. To do this, power up the Raspberry Pi Zero 2, let RetroPie boot up, then go to the RASPI-CONFIG option in the main menu. From there, select System Options and S1 Wireless LAN, choose your country of residence, then input your wireless network connection's SSID and password.

With that set up, you now can add a few ROMs to the Raspberry Pi Zero 2 ready for testing later. Obviously, we can't tell you where to get hold of these, but most readers will know they're only a few clicks away on your favourite search engine. ROMs can then be added wirelessly by first ensuring your Raspberry Pi Zero 2 is turned on, opening up a window on your PC, and typing \\RETROPIE into the Quick Access bar. (Find more detailed instructions for adding ROMs wirelessly at **retropie.org.uk/docs**, where you'll also find directions for Mac, Linux, and PC.)

MOD THE CONTROLLER

There's a surprising amount of space inside your typical SNES USB controller, though you'll still find that fitting everything we need into its shell will require some careful positioning – and a few nips and tucks here and there.

To begin with, we'll need to take the controller to bits by removing the screws in the back of the case. If you flip the backplate over, you'll see

"A complete, self-contained system capable of playing a wealth of retro games"

a number of plastic struts that will eventually need to be snipped away with a sharp pair of pliers or a craft knife (see **Figure 1**). Once the Raspberry Pi and other components start going in, you'll have a better idea of what will need to be trimmed out of the backplate, so put it to one side for now.

WIRE THE CONNECTOR

The beauty of our consolised joypad is that it's entirely self-contained. The HDMI cable will emerge straight from the controller itself, taking the place of the existing USB cable, while power will be delivered by that dinky LiPo battery – ➡
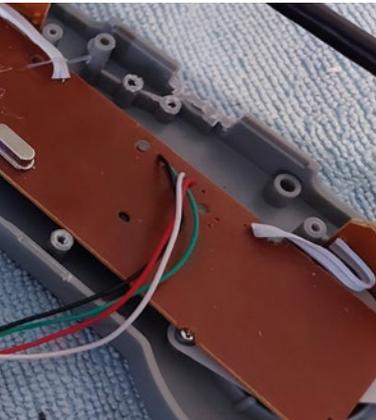
YOU'LL NEED:

Unless otherwise specified, all the items below were acquired from **thepihut.com**:

- Raspberry Pi Zero 2 W
- MicroSD card
- USB SNES controller
- PowerBoost 500C
- SPDT switch
- Mini HDMI-to-HDMI cable (2 m)
- 3.7 V 500mAh LiPo battery: *from Amazon.co.uk*
- 3 × jumper cables
- Velcro Command Strips *from Amazon.co.uk*
- 1 × micro USB-to-USB cable *(optional)*

Figure 2: When removing the existing USB cable, be sure to leave about 5 cm of the coloured wires behind.

Figure 3: A micro USB connector stripped and ready for use.

Figure 4: The wires from the controller need to be soldered to the connector like this. If you don't have a set of helping hands, taping the connector to a lid like this helps keep it still.


which in turn can be charged via the micro USB port on the PowerBoost 500C board.

For button inputs, we're going to connect the controller's existing USB cables to the Raspberry Pi Zero 2 using the stripped connector from a micro USB cable. To do this, we'll need to cut the USB cable from the controller while ensuring we have enough remaining wire to connect to the Raspberry Pi – around 5 cm should be plenty for now (**Figure 2**). If your controller's anything like ours, bear in mind that the wires soldered onto the board are quite delicate and have a tendency to detach if they're left to wiggle around too much. A bit of electrical or Kapton tape will help keep them from moving around as we get on with our project.

Next, take a micro USB cable, and with a pair of pliers, gently strip away the plastic sheath until you've revealed the metal innards of the male connector at the end – once you're finished, it should look something like **Figure 3**. With the old wires from the cable removed from the connector, you can now solder the wires from the controller in their place – the colour coding of the wires should be the same, with the order being black, green, white, and red from left to right (see **Figure 4**).

Once the wires have been soldered to the connector, you can give your joints some protection (and prevent any electrical shorts) by neatly wrapping them with a bit of electrical or Kapton tape (**Figure 5**).

> **"Your mileage may vary depending on which sort of joypad you're working with"**
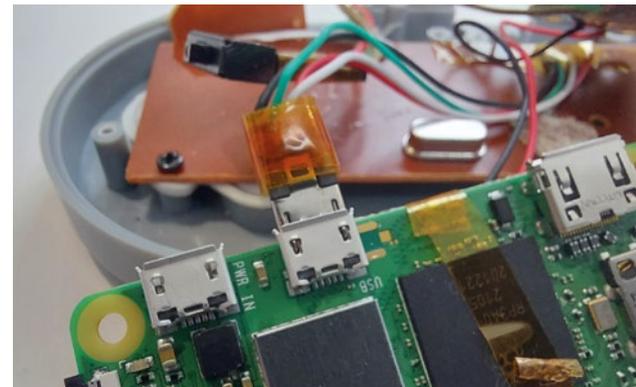

Figure 5: Once your USB wires are soldered in place, wrap a bit of Kapton tape around them for protection.

WIRE UP THE SWITCH

Our console-controller hybrid requires 5 volts to run, which will be delivered by the PowerBoost 500C – a tiny bit of tech that will take the power from our 3.7 V LiPo battery and uprate it to the correct voltage. What we'll need to add, though, is an on-off switch: we've used an SPDT (single pole, double throw) switch, which we'll connect to the PowerBoost with three colour-coded jumper cables. The female ends of the cables slide neatly onto the switch; the male ends can then be snipped off and soldered to the GND, EN, and Bat pins on the PowerBoost (**Figure 6**).

We then need to connect the PowerBoost to our Raspberry Pi Zero 2. There are two ways you can do this: you could use the stripped connector from a second micro USB cable, solder its 5 V and GND wires to the PowerBoost, and plug the connector end into the Raspberry Pi Zero 2's USB input. In practice, though, we found that
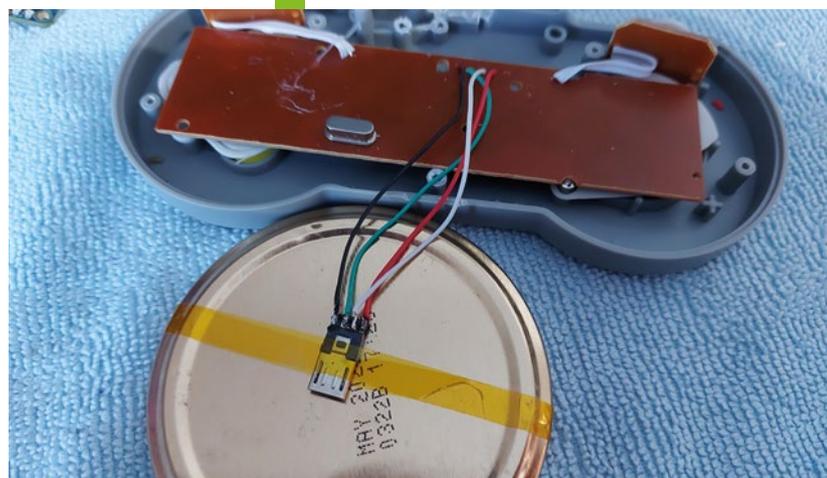
Figure 6: The jumper wires are soldered to the PowerBoost like this.
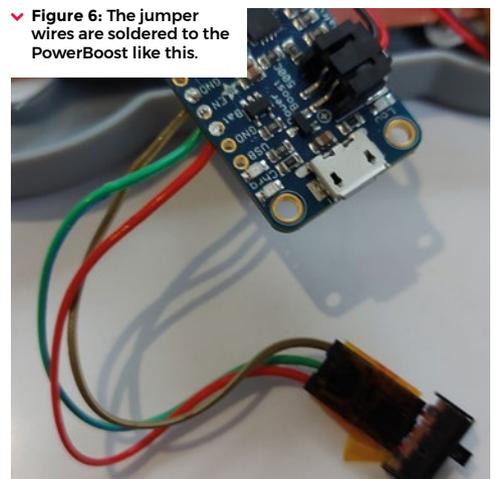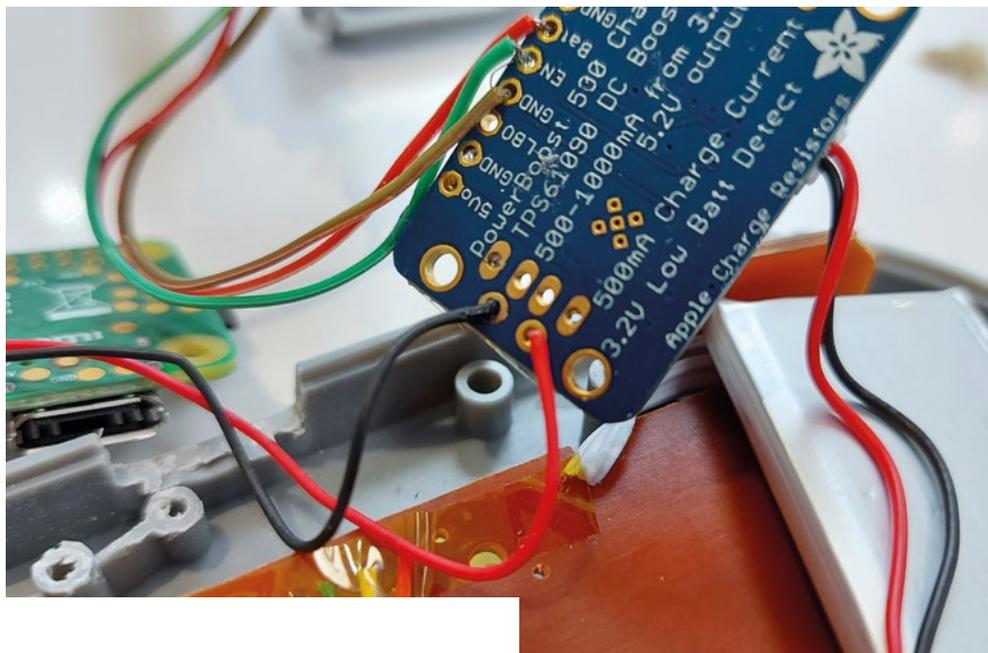
there simply wasn't quite enough room for the Raspberry Pi Zero 2 to fit inside the controller's case with the USB connector sticking out of it; your mileage may vary depending on which sort of joypad you're working with. Instead, we took two wires and soldered them to the 5 V and ground pins on the PowerBoost (see **Figure 7**), before soldering the other ends to the 5 V and ground pins on the underside of the Raspberry Pi Zero 2. We used another bit of Kapton tape to keep them neatly attached to the back of the Raspberry Pi Zero 2 (**Figure 8**).

CONNECT THE POWERBOOST

In terms of soldering, we're essentially finished – we can now connect the battery to the PowerBoost and see how things are working. A quick note here, though: these LiPo batteries sometimes have their positive (red) and negative (black) cables wired up the opposite way from the PowerBoost, so ensure you have them the right way around before plugging them in; if you get them reversed, you could run the risk of damaging the PowerBoost board (see **Figure 9**).

The LiPo battery probably isn't charged up, either, so have a 5 V micro USB charger handy, just in case. All being well, flicking your switch to the 'On' position will result in a blue light on your PowerBoost board, and a flickering green light on the Raspberry Pi Zero 2. If you want, you can connect your HDMI cable to the Raspberry Pi Zero 2, stick the other end in your TV or monitor, and carefully check that your Raspberry Pi boots up and that the buttons on your controller are behaving correctly. ➧
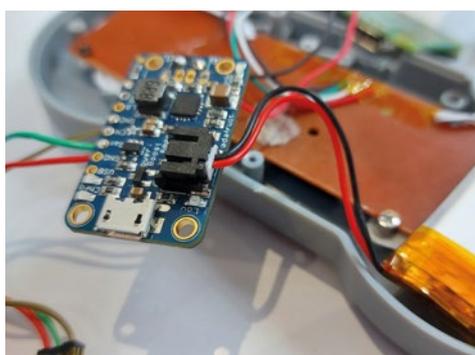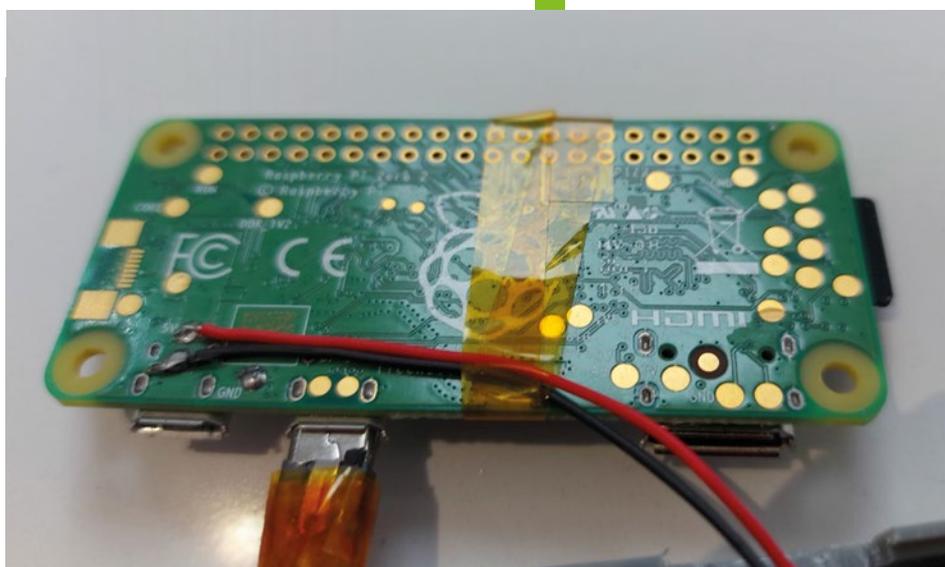
⌃ Figure 9: Ensure the positive (red) and negative (black) wires are the correct way around when you plug your LiPo battery into the PowerBoost.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

- Soldering iron
- Small screwdriver
- Leaded solder
- Wire strippers
- Sharp-nosed pliers
- Needle file
- Sharp craft knife

∧ **Figure 11:** We can now start to trim away the unwanted pieces of plastic from the two halves of the case.

RETROPIE ON RASPBERRY PI ZERO 2 W

At the time of writing, there isn't a specific version of RetroPie ready for the Raspberry Pi Zero 2 W. The good news is that the Raspberry Pi Zero 2 uses some of the same underlying tech as the Raspberry Pi 3B+, so that computer's image is sufficiently compatible. To download it, you'll need the latest version from RetroPie's Weekly Builds page at **wfmag.cc/RPWB**. Once this image is installed on your Raspberry Pi Zero 2, you'll need to connect it to the internet and ensure its drivers are all updated to the latest versions.

∧ **Figure 12:** Be sure to cut good-sized holes for the on-off switch and the PowerBoost's micro USB port.

ASSEMBLE THE CONTROLLER

With all the soldering and connecting done, the next job is to fit everything inside the joypad. **Figure 10** shows how we've laid everything out: the Raspberry Pi Zero 2 needs to sit towards the bottom right of the controller case so that the HDMI cable can go straight through the middle of the aperture, where the USB cable sat. The on-off switch will go underneath the Raspberry Pi Zero 2 at the bottom; the PowerBoost 500C will sit directly to the right of it, while our battery just about sits in the bit of space remaining on the far right.

It's now that you should see how much plastic will need to be carved out of the case to get everything to fit. We found that we had to cut most of the struts from the backplate to make enough room, with just the left and right supports for the screws left, so we can still secure the two halves of the case back together when we're finished (**Figure 11**). You'll also need to cut holes out of the case to allow for the HDMI cable, the switch, and the micro USB port on the PowerBoost – this is positioned as close as possible to the edge of the case so that when it's all reassembled, we can plug a charger in and feed the LiPo battery now and again (**Figure 12**).

Carving the case can be fiddly, but take your time, and use a needle file to smooth any rough edges. If you like, you can pare down the plastic housing on the mini HDMI connector so that you don't need to cut such a large hole at the top of the controller case; we eventually opted to leave

the connector alone and just whittle away at the controller, but it's entirely up to you (**Figure 13**).

While we were hacking away at the case, we also took a couple of spare screws and used them to secure the controller's board to the front plate; this is worth doing, since we've cut away the supports that once kept the board pressed firmly in place. Without these screws (see **Figure 14**), we found that the buttons felt a little spongy and hard to press, even with all those new components crammed in tightly behind them.

When it comes to fitting everything into the case, you can either use hot glue to mount the components to the controller's board, or take our approach: use Command strips instead. The latter option keeps everything securely in place, but it's also repositionable so you can make adjustments as you go along. We found this approach also helps the Raspberry Pi sit neatly on top of any components that may be sticking up from the back of the controller's board (**Figure 15**).

As you're fitting everything together, pay attention to how you route the various wires between components: these need to be positioned so that they aren't snagged by the screws or the shoulder buttons as the controller's reassembled. You'll also want to add some insulating tape between the PowerBoost and the underside of the Raspberry Pi to avoid any shorts.

> **"The built-in WiFi means you can add ROMs at any stage"**

PLAY SOME GAMES

With the controller screwed back together, you're essentially finished. You can now connect your device to a screen and start playing some games. If you haven't already, you'll need to configure the controller's buttons in RetroPie; it may give you a warning about not setting up a hot key if you run out of buttons to define, but don't worry – just press Select and Start at the same time to quit out of a game at any point. The built-in WiFi means you can add ROMs at any stage, as well as scrape the web for thumbnail images for your games.

There we have it: one compact, low-cost console in a joypad. Happy gaming! ⓦ

ALTERNATIVE CONTROLLERS

We've used a SNES replica as our controller for this build; within reason, you could use just about any joypad you like, assuming there's enough space inside to mount all your components. An original Xbox 'Duke' controller, for example, is roughly the size of a Fray Bentos pie tin, and should have ample room for this project.
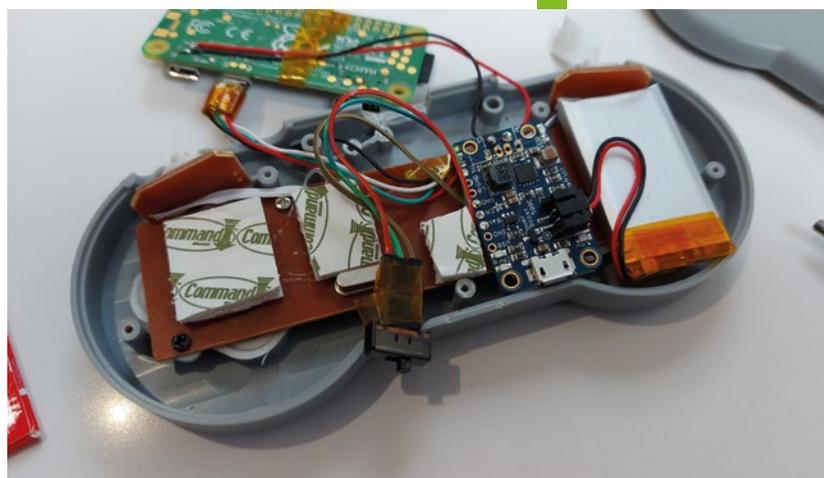
Source Code

Code an homage to the classic Skate or Die!

Master the half–pipe with our retro skating minigame challenge

AUTHOR
MARK VANSTONE

Skate or Die! came out in 1987 for the ZX Spectrum, NES, and other computers. Players were treated to five different skateboarding events including half-pipe stunts and downhill races. The aim was to score points by completing the challenges faster or with better sequences of stunts.

For our Pygame Zero take on Skate or Die!, we'll focus on the half-pipe minigame. The original had quite complicated controls to perform tricks and steer the skateboard, but for this example, we'll just focus on the skateboard speed and making turns at the apex of the half-pipe. We will use the left and right arrows to increase speed in each direction and the up arrow to do a turn.

The first thing to do is draw our background. For this example, we've used the background from the C64 version, but you could make up your own version. We also need two skater images: one facing left and one facing right. We'll start the skater

at the top of the half-pipe on the right-hand side of the screen. Once we've defined our skater as an Actor, we can add properties like direction and speed. We'll control the speed value with the arrow keys. The left arrow will reduce the speed value, and the right arrow will increase the speed value. A minus value will mean the skater moves left and a positive value means the skater moves right.

Now to make our skater move with the contour of the half-pipe. We need a way to work out what angle the ground is and where the skater is, and to do this we can make a gradient map. We use black pixels to indicate 90 degrees, white pixels to represent flat ground, and shades of grey for everything in between. So when our skater is over white pixels on the gradient map, they'll move horizontally, and as the pixels tend towards black, the movement will be more vertical. We don't have to draw this gradient map to the screen, but we access it by loading it with the Pygame image module and then using the `image.get_at()` function to read the pixel colour directly under our skater Actor.

As the gradient map is being read, we should see our skater moving down the half-pipe, across the flat floor, and then up the other side. We next need to change the angle of the skater to match the angle of the half-pipe, and we can get that from the gradient map, too. White pixels set the skater to 0 degrees; if they're on the right-hand side of the screen, black pixels mean 90 degrees, while on the left side, -90 degrees. Now we have an angle for our skater, we need to apply some gravitational effect to the speed so that as they're heading downwards, they accelerate, and when going up, they slow down. This will mean that the skater needs to be going fast

▲ **Skate Or Die!** featured some fabulous music by the legendary Rob Hubbard. If you hold the magazine closely, you can just about hear it.

enough to reach the apex of the half-pipe in order to do a turn in the air, but if they go too fast, they'll end up on the flat ground on the other side.

To get a turn in the air, we'll detect the up arrow key press. If the skater angle is greater than 75 degrees or less than -75, we trigger a turn. We set a countdown variable called `switch`, which we'll check in the `update()` function and move the skater vertically up for 30 frames, switch their direction, and then move them down again to complete the turn. We can count a score of how many times our skater completes a turn without ending up back on the flat ground at the top of the half-pipe. If the skater fails too many times, they'll end up falling off the bottom of the half-pipe. We can use the **SPACE** bar to reset them back to the starting point.

And that's the mechanics of our half-pipe game. The original Skate or Die!'s minigames each used slightly different controls and backgrounds, but we'll leave you to adapt our existing project to those challenges. Ⓦ
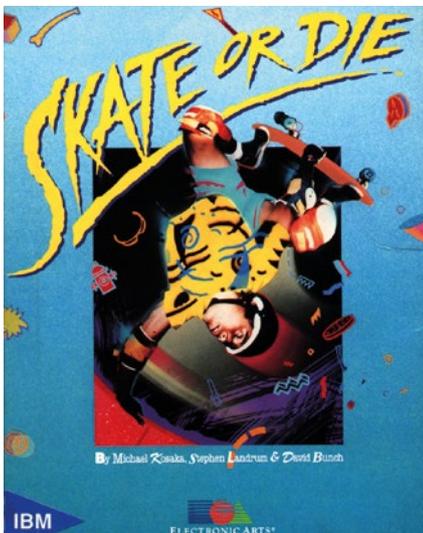
Heaven is a half-pipe

Here's Mark's code for a radical skateboarding minigame. To get it working on your system, you'll first need to install Pygame Zero. Full instructions can be found at **wfmag.cc/pgzero**.

```python
# Skate or Die
import pgzrun
from pygame import image

skater = Actor('skaterl',center=(700,230), anchor=('center','bottom'))
skater.direction = "l"
skater.speed = 0
skater.switch = 0
halfpipe = image.load('images/halfpipe.png')
score = 0

def draw():
    screen.blit("background", (0, 0))
    skater.draw()
    screen.draw.text("SKATE OR DIE", center = (400,
40),color=(255,255,255) , owidth=0.5, ocolor=(255,0,0), fontsize=50)
    screen.draw.text("SCORE: "+str(score), center = (400,
90),color=(255,255,255) , fontsize=38)

def update():
    if skater.y < 600:
        if keyboard.left and skater.angle  > -20 and skater.speed <= 0:
            skater.speed = limit(skater.speed - 0.2,-13,0)
            skater.y -= 0.2
        if keyboard.right and skater.angle < 20 and skater.speed >= 0:
            skater.speed = limit(skater.speed + 0.2,0,13)
            skater.y -= 0.2
        pixel = halfpipe.get_at((int(skater.x),int(skater.y)))
        if skater.switch > 0:
            skater.switch -= 1
            angle = skater.angle
            if skater.switch == 30:
                if skater.direction == "l":
                    skater.direction = "r"
                    skater.speed = 1
                    angle = -90
                else:
                    skater.direction = "l"
                    skater.speed = -1
                    angle = 90
                skater.image = "skater"+skater.direction
            skater.angle = angle
            if skater.switch > 30:
                if skater.direction == "l":
                    skater.x += 0.6
                else:
                    skater.x -= 0.6
                skater.y -= 4
            else:
                skater.y += 3
        else:
            skater.x = limit(skater.x+skater.speed,20,780)
            if skater.x <= 20 or skater.x >=780 and skater.speed > 0:
                skater.speed = 0
                if skater.x <= 20:
                    skater.direction = "r"
                else:
                    skater.direction = "l"
                skater.image = "skater"+skater.direction
            if skater.x > 400:
                offset = 255-pixel.b
            else:
                offset = pixel.b-255
            skater.angle = (offset)/3
            yinc = (offset*(-skater.speed)/100)
            skater.y += yinc
            skater.speed -= (skater.angle/100)
            skater.speed = skater.speed/1.005
        else:
            skater.image = "fallen"+skater.direction

def on_key_down(key):
    global score
    if key.name == "UP":
        if (skater.angle > 75 and skater.speed > 0) or (skater.angle <
-75 and skater.speed < 0):
            skater.speed = 0
            skater.switch = 60
            score += 1000
    if key.name == "SPACE" and skater.y > 600:
        skater.direction = "l"
        skater.speed = 0
        skater.pos = (720,230)
        skater.image = "skaterl"
        skater.angle = 0
        skater.switch = 15
        score = 0

def limit(n, minn, maxn):
    return max(min(maxn, n), minn)

pgzrun.go()
```


^ Our homage to the *Skate Or Die!* half-pipe. How many points can you score?

Interactive / Hoplegs

Developer Kevin Andersson explains how an idea dreamed up during a livestream formed the basis for his latest opus

The last time we caught up with Swedish developer Kevin Andersson was way back in issue 32, when he'd recently made his charming tile-swapping puzzler, *TaniNani*. Nearly two years on, and Andersson's just finished *Hoplegs*: a 2D platformer with an entirely different pace and tone from that previous outing. Like a combination of *Super Meat Boy* and *I Am Bread*, *Hoplegs* sees you control a cuboid character which can only be moved by shooting out a leg from four of its surfaces.

Each leg is mapped to four face buttons on your controller, and traversing each level requires carefully timed presses in order to bounce, fling, and generally cajole your cube in the right direction. In other words, *Hoplegs'* controls are the opposite of intuitive – which, of course, is precisely the point: wrestling with the game's physics is as much a challenge as learning the layouts of each level, and the sense of chaos only increases when you rope in a friend for its co-op mode.

Andersson began work on *Hoplegs* immediately after *TaniNani*'s launch in early 2020, and if you're a watcher of his livestreams on Twitch, you may have seen its genesis unfold in real time. "Since I live stream the majority of my development, I had a spontaneous little idea one day and I just had to try it out," Andersson tells us. "It was a green box with coloured legs that extended, which let you jump in a weird way. It wasn't easy to control, but I recorded a GIF after the stream right before I went to bed."

Without thinking too much of it, Andersson uploaded the GIF to his Twitter account. It was only when he woke up the next morning that he realised the tweet had blown up overnight. "In the end, it became my biggest tweet ever," he says, "so I knew that there was something interesting to work with."

▲ One of *Hoplegs'* best features is its level editor – it's possible to draw out a devious course of platforms and obstacles within minutes.

▲ Andersson managed to get his initial jumping mechanics up and running within four hours – all live on Twitch.

Spurred on by the hundreds of likes and retweets, Andersson continued to develop large chunks of what would become *Hoplegs* on his Twitch stream, with viewers suggesting ideas as the game gradually took shape. "Some of it was really fun, and [their suggestions] often didn't take long to try, which led them to feel invested," Andersson explains. "A fun community started to grow."

HOP TO IT

Hoplegs' design is similarly designed to foster a sense of community: the mechanics themselves seem tailor-made for streamers to wrestle in front of their viewers, while a level editor means that players can create infuriating obstacle courses of their own. Andersson also put the game into Early Access within a few months of development – all the better to get feedback from players. "The best part must be seeing everyone play the game live and cursing my name," Andersson says. "Then having this back and forth again with the community and their levels. I didn't change much in the story mode [after Early Access], but the biggest work was on the level editor. Although there was this one section of a level I added some safe landing space because almost a third of the players stopped playing in one specific level."

Indeed, ensuring that *Hoplegs*' difficulty isn't too infuriating for newcomers was one of Andersson's major considerations as he began designing its levels. "It was important to me that a new player could pick up the game and slowly get through levels and learn how it worked, but also leave room for skilled players to have fun if they replayed a level. I actually made sure

that the earlier levels barely had any upward direction, so there wasn't a risk of falling down and losing progress, that would make the player quit the game. Getting the actual second-to-second gameplay to feel good is a combination of luck and a lot of testing."

Both before and after *Hoplegs*' release on Steam and Nintendo Switch, Andersson's been constantly impressed by some of the level designs created by its growing community. "The best one before release was someone who made a space level; the game has zero gravity fields, so they filled a big area and placed some ground circle [objects] as planets, and you had to push yourself through the level. I first saw that during a livestream, so it was a good moment for the community. Then, after release, someone made an escape room level... That was very well executed and I was blown away."

"The best part is seeing everyone play the game and cursing my name"

Andersson doesn't yet know whether *Hoplegs* will be ported to other platforms, but he's keen to keep supporting the game for some time yet – and, as ever, keeping players involved in whatever comes next. "I want to do more updates because I have more ideas to challenge players," Andersson enthuses. "I hope to have a communication between me and the players about what they want to see as well."

You can follow Andersson's game dev livestreams at **twitch.tv/anderssonkev**. Ⓦ

FOR ART'S SAKE

While *Hoplegs*' essential design came together quickly (less than a month, in fact) and Andersson figured out the game's zany story within a fortnight, the artwork represented its own challenge, he says. "I always have trouble with the art for my projects since it doesn't come easy to me, but during the summer I had just bought a new iPad, so I spend some time every day drawing stuff. Eventually, I took a screenshot of the game and started drawing over it. I had some help from my friends who are artists to adjust some colour values. It's nice to have talented friends around you that can help."

▼ The player's on a decidedly slippery slope here.
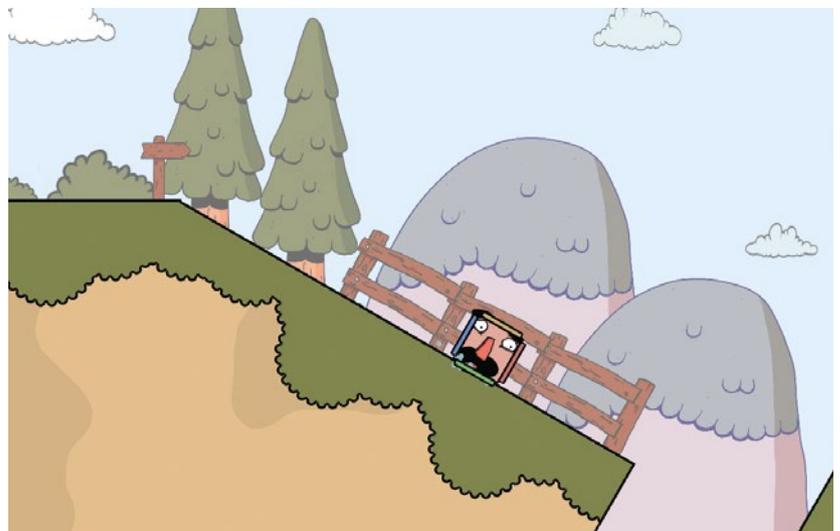
DIGITAL LOVE

For a medium intent on proving itself as an art form, how has gaming handled that most grown-up aspect of human relationships: the romance?

WRITTEN BY
DAN COOPER

Although it would be a stretch to call it romantic, *Donkey Kong* was one of the earliest games to tell a visual story, with its cutscenes between levels establishing the relationship between the protagonist, Jumpman (who would later become Mario), and his love interest, Pauline. While it was *Donkey Kong*'s addictive proto-platformer gameplay that would hook players across the globe, the inclusion of a romantic subplot, however rudimentary, would add an extra dimension to all of the running and jumping, providing players with a context for their actions and raising the stakes for success and failure alike.

The 'damsel in distress' archetype was thus born in games. It would form the template for early romantic storylines, typically consisting of a muscle-bound hero venturing across an inexplicably long journey through thug-infested streets to rescue their beloved from the endgame boss – all in the name of true love. (Why these

The anime style of *Doki Doki Literature Club!* hides a much darker game beneath its colourful veneer.

^ **Donkey Kong** was partly inspired by **King Kong**, which also used the 'damsel in distress' trope to iconic effect.
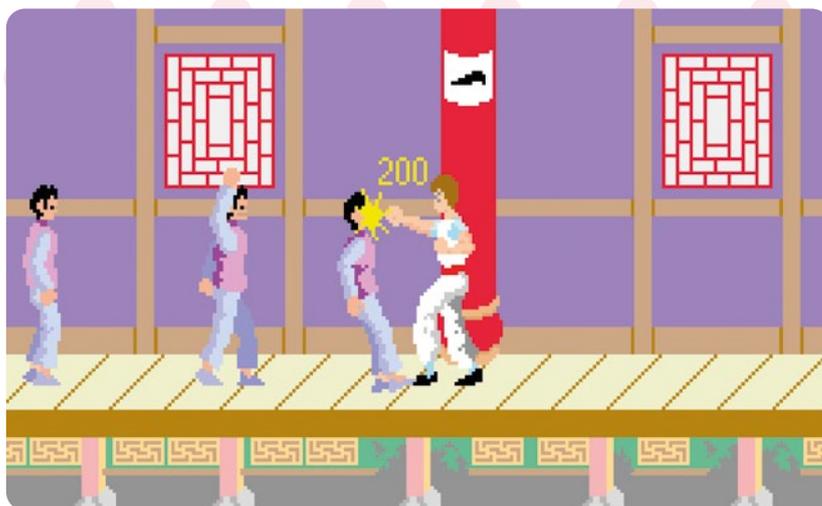
^ **Kung-Fu Master** was one of many 1980s games that used 'save the girlfriend' as the motivation for punching strangers in the face.

characters never hopped in a cab and simply went straight for Mr Big however, we could never quite tell.) Beating down endless goons in 1984's *Kung-Fu Master*, 1987's *Double Dragon*, 1988's *Vigilante*, and 1989's *Final Fight* was satisfying enough, but sprinkling in a romantic subplot to save each protagonist's girlfriend added an enticing dimension to the power fantasy.

It would take decades for romantic plots within games to escape their one-dimensional early years; maturing beyond an excuse for a character to beat people up. Eventually, romance in the medium evolved with titles such as *The Sims*, and the later games in the *Persona* series, while even *GTA: San Andreas* divorced romantic plots from their connection with violence. Relationships in video games would reach new heights in 2009 with *Dragon Age: Origins*, a dark fantasy role-playing game that along with 2007's *Mass Effect* is considered to be a watershed moment for romantic plots in games.

Dragon Age: Origins and its sequels would build on the work of previous BioWare titles, including *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, to craft romance narratives that felt compellingly real. For David Gaider, lead writer on those games, creating non-player characters that felt three-dimensional was crucial: "I think the most important thing that you need," he tells us, "is the sense that the character you're romancing has a life and existence of their own, that they aren't

"I've seen games like that: you hit the 'romance button'"

just puppets for whatever you want. I've seen games like that: you hit the 'romance button' and they will do whatever you want, and they exist for you regardless of your actions. I think that makes them a lot less compelling. I think the idea that this character might not decide to romance you if you do or say the wrong things, that they have their own agenda, is powerful."

Gaider gives an example from *Dragon Age: Origins* as an early example of romanceable characters whose aspirations run far deeper than being the player's love interest. "Take Morrigan, for example," he says. "She may be romancing you, but she has her own thing going on. The fact that you are romancing her does not overtake that." It's a sentiment that, over a decade later, seems simple, but it's hard to underestimate the significant impact this approach had. With the release of *Origins*, romanceable characters had evolved from unthinking trinkets to be awarded to the player for their victory, to becoming fully realised characters with motivations that often ran counter to the player's own. ➡

WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

BioWare's *Dragon Age* games are famous for their romances, inspiring many a meme, not to mention countless pages of slash fiction. But what inspired lead writer David Gaider when writing these romantic entanglements? "Did I pull from anything specific?" he muses. "Not really. I don't really consider myself to be a guy that likes romances in fantasy or larger stories. I'll take it like *Aliens* anytime, where there maybe is a bit of an attraction between Hicks and Ripley during the movie, but it's never explored; there's no romance arc. I prefer that; I'm not the big romantic everybody thinks I am just because I worked on these games. Given [the choice]–1, I'd stay in that 'will they/won't they?' flirtatious space."

^ *Dragon Age: Origins'* **Morrigan had an agenda beyond acting as a simple love interest to the player's character.**

FORGING A NEW PATH

For further proof of *Dragon Age: Origins'* impact on romantic storytelling in the medium, consider the developers it has influenced since. Developer Kan Gao, of Freebird Games, is the creator of the acclaimed *To The Moon* series of games, which explores romantic relationships in a poignant and achingly human way. When it comes to using games to explore romance, Gao is clear where his influences stemmed from: "It would be *Dragon Age: Origin*," he smiles. "Whilst it isn't a romance game, the relationships certainly had a very real pull to them. I loved those camp scenes where after a long, hard day of battle, being in

^ **Before the voice actors arrived, the writers on** *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* **wrote some flirty dialogue… until they heard it read out and realised it was too much.**

a relaxed environment with your companions made you want to seek out a connection with the characters, especially when they were presented in such a real way."
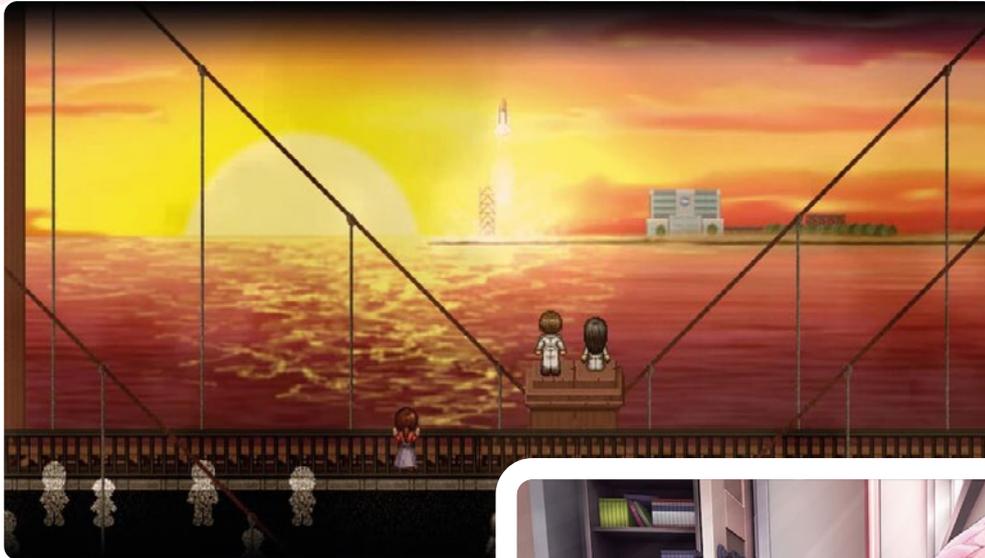
Gao would know a thing or two about creating characters and relationships that feel real. With 2011's *To The Moon*, a staunchly indie title, he weaves a beautifully depicted tale of love and loss. "I think authentic romance is one that makes the player feel a sense of longing, in one sense or another, within the game world," says Gao. "To do that, it has to feel relatable and authentic in some way to the player. For romance in any authored experience, it should certainly be more dramatic than most real-life experiences, but it comes from a vector from which most people can relate; it just extends that vector."

To The Moon takes depictions of romance in a different direction from *Dragon Age: Origins*, as well as the games that have followed in its footsteps, with varying degrees of success, such as *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, *Cyberpunk 2077*, the later *Assassin's Creed* titles, and the *Fallout* games. Instead of offering choices that must be successfully navigated to achieve romantic fulfilment, the player's instead a memory-hopping observer, watching the various stages of a relationship unfold throughout time.

"You can interact with the world, but not so much with what happens in the world," explains Gao. "There's certainly a wonderful type of experience from the multiple-choice style of games. Some would argue that's what games are all about: the choices. *Dragon Age: Origins* is

one of my favourite games; I love what they did with it. At the same time, there's also value in the type of [romantic] experience that's more directed – there's a dichotomy there; you can't give players a fully directed experience while giving players branching options. As the director, you sometimes feel 'this is the one way we want this to go to give players a particular feeling at the ending', and that's the choice that I made, because all of *To The Moon* is really building to that last moment, what the player feels right before the credits roll. Everything else is wrapped around players feeling that moment in the way it was supposed to be felt."

THE ODD COUPLE

The conflict between player agency and developer authorship is a struggle that sits at the heart of many games, but is especially essential to romantic plots, where the player's character is involved within a romance rather than simply observing one unfold, such as in *To The Moon*. In that scenario, argues Gaider, choice is essential: "Agency, in my mind, doesn't require that the game bend to whatever your character's romantic desires may be," he explains. "I think it just requires that the game allows you to make a choice then, in turn, reacts to that choice. You certainly wouldn't want a romance

"It isn't a romance game, but the relationships had a very real pull to them"

to proceed without input from the player either because that's then loss of agency, too. It has to be a two-way street: when you make choices, the characters react, and when the characters make choices, you need the ability to react too, and that's what creates the illusion of a real relationship, I think."

While authored portrayals of romantic subplots – such as Campo Santo's *Firewatch* – can still be powerful, reflecting on such an experience afterwards may seem hollow when the façade of agency is shorn away and you realise that your character's romantic experience was largely identical to every other player's. "That's interesting in *Firewatch*," notes Gaider, "but you don't get to make any choices. In terms of optional romances in the BioWare ➡

▲ Romantic imagery is a key part of establishing the central relationship at the heart of *To The Moon*.

style, not many games do anything that's similar. There's the *Fallout* games, *3* and *4*, but they [romances] always feel like they're a bit obligatory. *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* pleasantly surprised me with romances. It was sort of a 'Romance 101', but it's great that they're doing that."

The notion of romances in games being nothing more than a series of correct answers or tasks that need to be completed is one that Gaider summarises as "that model of 'romance, romance, romance, reward... and the reward is sex.'" It's a well-worn trope in romantic scenarios in games, the illusion of 'choice' suggesting that players are free to pursue a romance in a number of ways, with the truth being something far more mundane, often revolving around picking correct dialogue responses or completing fetch quests.

Doki Doki Literature Club!, meanwhile, uses the player's experience of romance in games to delightfully subversive effect. Ostensibly a dating sim, the game leads the player into a mind-bending journey that simply has to be experienced to be believed. According to the game's creator, Dan Salvato, upending "the trope where a few simple choices can lead to

the perfect outcome" was straightforward, given how entrenched within games (especially the dating sim genre), the mechanic has become. "I didn't need to try very hard to make the player expect a certain level of agency, because players already know how dating sims are supposed to work," he says. "Those 'rules', and various other unspoken rules, are the basis of *DDLC!* being a disturbing experience. Once the rules are broken, you don't even know what the game is anymore. It's not a 'dating sim' – it becomes a weird, uncategorised experience that can do anything at any time, and that's scary."

Salvato is insistent that to truly develop, romance mechanics and narratives within games must continue to evolve: "Players are looking to connect with characters who have relatable human qualities, rather than characters who can live happily ever after simply because the protagonist said or did a few specific things. That's the trope I cared the most about truly challenging – the one where all it takes is a magical combination of simple decisions for you to turn someone's life around."

Gaider, for his part, is unsurprised that outside of the indie sphere, mainstream titles aren't pushing romance elements in bolder directions. "Am I surprised that other companies don't really do romances? No. A lot of players who play through the BioWare romances are surprised to hear that only a minority of players actually even complete them. The majority of players go through the games without initiating them, for both the *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* games."

> **"If you're going to do romance content, you should be responsible"**

an enormous positive difference. I really want to be a part of that difference."

"It feels like at this point, if you're going to do romance content, you should take efforts to be responsible," adds Gaider. "I think a lot of the problems that exist are generally committed by people who haven't taken the time to think through the ramifications of what they're making, what it's saying."

Despite romantic plots remaining fairly stagnant in triple-A titles, since the progress of the *Dragon Age* series, Gao believes that any games aiming to capture the essence of a meaningful relationship between two human beings should lean into the unique narrative opportunities the medium offers. "It gives us a unique lens to look at romance and relationships in a simpler way compared to real life, and there's value and attraction in that," he reasons. "You might say that in real life, relationships can sometimes get too complicated, whereas in video games you can pinpoint the area you want to focus on and you can get just complicated enough, so something can be learned. In many ways, the limitations [offered by video game relationships] are valuable, and in the foreseeable future, that's the way things will stay." ⓦ

> ‹ *Dragon Age: Inquisition*'s romance plots can lead to some truly devastating revelations. Not every relationship ends in a happy ever after. Far from it, in fact.

CHORUS OF PRAISE

In 2019, David Gaider co-founded Summerfall Studios in Melbourne, Australia. The team announced its first game, *Chorus: An Adventure Musical*, that same year, and while details are still largely under wraps, Gaider does reveal that "the people who've playtested *Chorus* have said that there's a lot of the BioWare DNA in the writing of the romances. I can't help that, I spent 17 years at BioWare, it's my DNA too, so there's a lot of similarities and some lessons learned."

FREE LOVE?

A wider issue needs to be considered here, too. An increasingly diverse player base naturally wants to see themselves, and their experiences of romance, represented on the screen. With player communities more vocal than ever before, Gaider wonders if identity politics debates make the prospect of tackling romance narratives less attractive: "In the later [BioWare] games, the fact that we had romances played into a larger conversation about sexuality and representation. It was no longer just about game content. There were players who talked about 'their right' to have this content provided for them, about the morality of not being provided this content. That kind of conversation ends up dominating the talk about your games, and I can totally see why some, or even a lot of developers, will think, 'We don't want any part of this; we just want to make an exciting combat game'."

This is perhaps the reason, then, that we will continue to see the indie sector pushing innovation in the romance genre, where creators can continue to weave romantic stories that are personal to them, free from the intrusions of PR, marketing, algorithms, or the need to forsake depth for diversity. It's certainly a sentiment echoed by Salvato. "I want to write characters with qualities that are personally meaningful to me," he explains. "Maybe it can help [players] feel less alone. While I can't definitively conclude whether shallow character representations have an observable negative impact on society, I do feel confident – based on all the incredible stories people have shared with me about *Doki Doki Literature Club!* – that deep and realistic character representations are magical, and they can make

> ⌃ When *Doki Doki Literature Club!* reveals its true nature, the game turns conventional romance narratives on its head.

Stress and Success

The Runner Duck story

Co-founders Dave Miller and Jon Wingrove share how they went from disillusionment to number one Steam success with Bomber Crew and Space Crew

WRITTEN BY **RYAN LAMBIE**

> *Space Crew: Legendary Edition*'s Away Team missions send you out on tense on-foot skirmishes.

> In *Bomber Crew*, keeping your mighty craft in the air required careful management.

As strategy games, both *Bomber Crew* and *Space Crew* straddle the line between complexity and breezy fun; their respective craft are logically laid out, but your understanding of those controls soon goes out the window when you're assaulted by enemy fighter planes, or trapped in a deadly asteroid field. In short, the *Crew* games are stressful – albeit in a fun way.

Runner Duck co-founder and artist Dave Miller realised just how stressful *Bomber Crew* was during a visit to his GP one day. "It takes a certain player to enjoy this type of game," Miller observes. "I went to a doctor recently and it turns out he'd played *Bomber Crew*. He was complaining about how difficult it was, how stressful it was. And this is coming from someone that works in the NHS!"

Bomber Crew itself was born out of – well, not stress, exactly, but rather dissatisfaction. Miller first met programmer Jon Wingrove in 2011; in time, they'd found Runner Duck together. But around six years ago, they were working at someone else's company, and united by a collective sense of ennui. "We really didn't enjoy the work we were doing there," Wingrove says. "We were making software that we weren't interested in in the slightest, and then sort of working around the edges…"

"We hated our jobs – absolutely hated them," Miller adds. "I mean, Jon's being polite. I *hated* it. A lot of the industry was moving towards free-to-play and mobile stuff. So we ended up doing free-to-play mobile games, which are fine. But we hated it. It just felt like the free-to-play model was just sucking all the heart and all the fun out. ➡

t's the kind of stress that sneaks up behind you. Catches you unawares. One minute you're happily flying among the stars and fulfilling all your Captain Kirk-style daydreams. The next, one of your engines is on fire, you've sent a crew member out to fix the damage, and you can only watch, helpless, as said crew member is knocked into the depths of space by a passing asteroid. It's a not-uncommon occurrence in *Space Crew*, enough to make anyone shake their fist at the sky and let out a primal yell – which is something your humble writer may or may not have actually done during the scenario outlined above.

Space Crew's the latest title from the UK's Runner Duck Games, and a sci-fi-themed successor to its similarly brisk strategy-sim, *Bomber Crew*. Both games are about maintaining equilibrium in situations designed to constantly throw you off balance.

In *Bomber Crew*, you fly a WWII plane on various missions while avoiding the constant threat of death from enemy fire. In *Space Crew*, you have a fragile craft to maintain in the coldest depths of the universe, marauding aliens to combat, and missions that test your ability to command and manage your wayward crew.

Fodder for thought

In the *Crew* games, losing a team member can cause a genuine sense of loss – partly because each one has its own name and individual quirks. It's a sense of connection that Miller first experienced playing Sensible Software's Amiga classic, *Cannon Fodder*, as a youth. "*Cannon Fodder* was great because all the characters were called Jools and Jops and things like that," Miller says. "It really stuck with me because when you lost Jools or Jops or one of the early characters, you really lost them – you go back to the start screen and there's a little gravestone on the hill. So it really, really mattered when you lost a character. More recently, I've been playing *Call of Duty* and stuff, and I just kind of felt like it doesn't matter – I can just restart from the last checkpoint. We wanted to make a game where every decision you make has a consequence."

Stream success

"It's the kind of game where we got quite a lot of streamers playing it," Wingrove says when we ask how *Bomber Crew* became such an indie hit. "It's the kind of game where if you watch someone else play it, you'll immediately think, 'Well, I would have done that better…' You can get really excited about having that experience yourself and thinking about what your crew would be like. I think at the time, as well, *Bomber Crew* was quite fresh and exciting to people – it had been a long time since *FTL* and I don't think there's really been much in that vein since."

In *Space Crew*, your missions are made even more nail-biting when the occasional alien sneaks aboard.

Most of the time, we were in meetings discussing how [to] change the colour of a button every week so people would notice it and give us money. And how can we make this game frustrating enough so that people give us money to skip elements of it? It genuinely made me depressed."

Spurred on by their collective disillusionment, Miller and Wingrove began working on prototypes. They didn't necessarily know what they were going to make just yet, but they knew they wanted to make something more personal – that actually mattered to them. That was more reflective of the games they played as kids. "The bomber aspect – I've always been fascinated by that," Miller says of their debut game's early design stages. "My great-uncle was a radio operator in a Whitley bomber. Most of his missions were dropping propaganda leaflets and stuff. He did drop a few bombs. He just played everything down, but when you learn about exactly what the aircrews went through – it was so, so dangerous. It's fascinating to me that they're in this machine they have to operate, and all the systems have to work. Because as soon as your oxygen goes, you can't breathe. If you have heated suits and they stop working, then you freeze. It's like a life support machine and you have to keep all the plates spinning."

With a concept in mind, the pair worked up a simple prototype, and began putting GIFs of it on Twitter. To their surprise, a publisher from Poland got in touch ("At first I had

"We worked it out on a napkin: how much money we might need"

Things can quickly go heart-stoppingly wrong in *Bomber Crew*. When you're forced to send someone out onto a burning wing, mid-air? That's a bad sign.

to check: was this a scam? But no, it was a real, decent publisher," Miller recalls). This early nibble of interest made Miller and Wingrove realise that maybe they didn't have to make the entire game before they tried to sell it. Maybe they should make a demo, write up a pitch, and see whether any publishers were interested in funding it.

"We worked it out on the back of a napkin in a pub," Miller says. "How much money we might need to finish the project. And then we wrote an email that said, 'Here's the elevator pitch', which was '*FTL* in a World War II bomber'… We made a little 30-second video from what we had running in Unity, put some music from *Band of Brothers* over the top to give it pathos. We said we need 15 months or something to finish it."

Before long, Curve Digital stepped in, and Runner Duck had the backing it needed to make its first game. Even better news followed when *Bomber Crew* launched in 2017: the game hit the number one spot on Steam. A game that had begun as a part-time project, and had been the subject of many late nights, was officially an indie hit. "When you work on a game for so long, it's hard to keep a perspective on it," Miller says. "But when we got the first few hours of sales figures in and we saw it was going to be OK, it was a dream come true. I took my family out for breakfast the weekend after it came out, and it was probably the best day of my life. Because we had all that stress… the months, the years of work were paying off."

Better yet: the success gave Runner Duck the foundation for making a second game. Or, as Miller puts it, "We didn't have to go with caps in hands asking for our old jobs back…"

Of course, rather than go the obvious route and make a straight sequel to *Bomber Crew*, Runner Duck decided to take the series into the sci-fi realm. For Wingrove, *Space Crew*'s

astral setting gave them the latitude to play with systems and ideas that wouldn't have fitted in its WWII-themed predecessor: things like moving around in 3D space, zero gravity, and the threat of running out of oxygen. "One of the main things was bringing in new gameplay elements," Wingrove says. "It's about giving players a wider range of strategies and approaches."

Having the backing of Curve Digital (its parent company, Catalis SE, formally acquired Runner Duck in 2019) also gave the duo the freedom to continue expanding *Space Crew* in the wake of its release in 2020. Which brings us to *Space Crew: Legendary Edition* – the free update released in October 2021. One of its biggest additions is an 'away team' mechanic, where three members of the player's hapless crew can touch down on enemy outposts to complete on-foot missions. Says Wingrove, "We didn't start prototyping the away team stuff until after we'd finished the main game… When I started messing around with the away team stuff, I didn't actually tell anyone else I was doing it. I was secretly putting stuff together and I made a little video of it. I hadn't got it to the point where it was playable, but I was convinced that although it looked like a different mode, it wouldn't take a ridiculous amount of work."

An additional set of missions – the Android Ambush campaign – was conceived around the same time, and ended up in the same *Legendary Edition* update. All told, Runner Duck managed to get the expansion finished in about a year – not bad going, given that, although the team had grown from two members to four, it's still tiny. For now, Miller and Wingrove are happy to keep Runner Duck as a small group of friends, working on games that get them creatively fired up. "The team is a really nice size for us," Wingrove says. "I think you could go up a little bit more in team size and not be any faster because there'd be all the extra communication it brings."

"We've worked in large teams before, and at bigger companies," Miller adds. "I think *Relentless* was over a hundred people at one point. But if we got that big, we'd just become managers, and that's not really what we signed up for."

Aside from continued support for the *Crew* games, Runner Duck is also working on an entirely new game, though details of that are still under wraps. One thing we can predict? It won't contain any of those free-to-play elements that left them so disillusioned with their old jobs. "It's nice to work on a game where our focus is on making it as good as possible," says Wingrove. "We're not trying to trick anyone. Which is why we didn't like the free-to-play stuff – we just want to make something really high-quality, so that people will like it, enjoy it, and want to tell their friends." ⓦ

▲ Artist and Runner Duck co-founder Dave Miller.
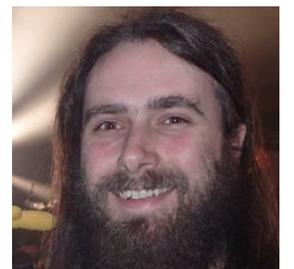
▲ Programmer and Runner Duck co-founder Jon Wingrove.

‹ *Space Crew*'s fights occur in real time, and you need to tag incoming craft and prioritise attacks.

Online Diary

GITTIN' GUD

Finger on the pulse, as always; this month,
it's a first-ever go at Rocket League

WRITTEN BY IAN "TIMELY" DRANSFIELD

Rocket League released in July 2015 and was immediately available as part of the PlayStation Plus subscription package: a decision that proved to be phenomenally smart on the part of developer Psyonix as it meant millions downloaded the game, plenty of those actually played it, and Rocket League became huge in a fairly short amount of time. But while plenty did download the game when it was up for (sort of) free, not everybody played it. I, for one, did not.

So Rocket League has been sat on my PS4 hard drive, then transferred over to my PS5's external hard drive, over the course of about five-and-a-half years. Unplayed. Untouched.

Known and recognised, even being something of a temptation at times, but never actually booted up. And boy howdy do I feel stupid now. Turns out, friends, that Rocket League is really good fun and a great way to spend a bit of an evening with a friend or friends.

As I write this, I'm still trying to suss out just why it immediately landed with me so well – and I'll still be wondering I'm sure, after this magazine's gone to press. There's something about the game that just clicked, and it's not only because it's football, but with cars – even a micro-brain like myself can understand that concept. I've played many online titles that have often left me feeling cold – they're established, the good players are great, and there are rules both said and unsaid about the whole thing. It feels like one big club you're not a part of, where you can't do much before you get shot in the face (or otherwise beaten).

Rocket League meanwhile... I understand. I'm no good. But I instantly grasped the basics thanks to the straightforward setup (carball) and limited controls (accelerate, reverse, jump, boost, handbrake). I'd posit there's an increased understanding that comes thanks to decades of being indoctrinated into Loving Football, too. Playing five-a-side can't have hurt, as there are tricks of that game that apply to Rocket League too, such as hammering the ball against the wall to knock it back out into the middle of the field for your heroic, marauding midfielder to come thundering onto the end of. I've done that in real life, and I've now done it in Rocket League.

⌄ There are other modes I barely touched, such as the one where powers unlock every ten seconds. Like, for example, tornadoes. Of course.

▲ The moment I realised I might be onto something, for the first time in Gittin' Gud history.

I feel *seen*. And I'm 100% sure this is a completely different experience to millions of other players of the game, as freezing cold five-a-side in the North of England isn't exactly a widely shared experience in the gaming community. So other players have their other styles – they leap like salmon-cars, floating (and flying) through the air in wild displays of technical excellence, attempting to score the most outlandish of goals as I watch in awe. But then they miss and we thunder up the other end as quickly as possible, attempting to absolutely batter the ball into the goal using the most direct and destructive techniques possible. The fact is, *Rocket League* caters for both approaches, and I'm sure many more. That's a lot more than can be said for other titles on these pages in past issues, which have been far more rigid in their approach. While you're often able to play in your own way, you're rarely able to do so while feeling like you might actually be successful in doing so – even if *Rocket League* has its preferred style of play, which it probably does especially in high-level play, the simple fact is I helped win some matches by playing like a vehicular version of Duncan Ferguson. Even if my friend Dan did all the heavy lifting, it felt good, I felt like I'd contributed by playing in a way that is fun for me, and… what else is there to say apart from 'it was well good, like'.

There's plenty in there I'm not keen on – the free-to-play nature is a natural turn-off, with an emphasis on battle passes (they're not called that) and purchasing in-game money for in-game cosmetics. Some players are… let's go with 'trolls'. And the music selection is a nice reminder that I am not the target generation for this game. But none of it is even in the same (rocket) league of put-offs as something like being sniped from the other end of the map for the 15th time by the same player on *Halo Infinite*. So I am, indeed, not put off.

As I say, I'm no good at it yet. But the 'yet' is doing a lot of legwork there, because *Rocket League* is the first time I can think of in Gittin' Gud's whole history that there's a game I actively want to come back to on these pages so I can update the world on my progress. And… well, I probably will do that. It's taken me nearly six years to actually play the thing, but it took me seconds to form a basic understanding and a few days to get good enough to be actually effective – in small ways – in matches. That's all I've ever wanted from an online game, so I do indeed feel like a chump for not playing it til now. Ⓦ

"It's taken me nearly six years to actually play the thing"

Big burly tactics
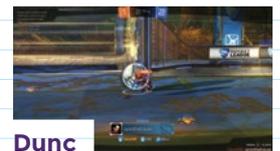
Dunc
I've found playing like Duncan Ferguson helps. Basically barrel through everything in your way and score a (car-)header at the far post. The kids don't expect mid-1990s Premier League tactics.

Custom
I won't engage in spending money on liveries, but I will engage in making my Sweet Tooth ice cream truck a horrible shade of green. Customisation shows you have a personality! Probably.

Laugh
But seriously, don't take it too… seriously. *Rocket League* is established, it has really excellent players, and you will lose a lot in your first bunch of games. So just laugh about it. It's healthier.

Xbox

Time marches on, but the
console never got any smaller

T here's no real need to go
through the ins and outs of
Microsoft's bold entry to the
console gaming market from
2001, given the company
has put together its own, surprisingly
comprehensive history of the Xbox here:
wfmag.cc/XM.
Yes, it's 20 years
(and a bit) since
the big chunky box
launched in the US
– we have to wait
until March until it hits its European 20th
– and it's taken that long for Microsoft to
officially confirm the company did indeed
try to buy Nintendo, sending a letter to
the Japanese company in October 1999.
This, and more (including The Rock), can
be found in the excellent Museum you
can find through that previous link.

So if we're not going to talk about the
straight-up 20-year history of the Xbox,
what are we going
to talk about here?
Well, it makes sense
to dive into things
with a bit more of
a personal bent:
rather than the academic history of the
console, what about the lived history?
Anecdotes and experiences win out over
lectures being delivered at your face any
day, and the Xbox was, it's fair to say, an
understated disruptor in the world of
console gaming.

That first console was a monster, and
standing next to its contemporaries –
the PS2 and GameCube – it did look

> **"The Xbox was, it's fair
> to say, an understated
> distruptor in gaming"**

^ It's actually impressive how much bigger a star The Rock is nowadays than he was 20 years ago, considering he was *massive* back then. Huh.

more like a desktop PC than a pure gaming machine. Here's the dirty little secret: that's because it basically was a desktop PC. Microsoft had pulled together relatively generic computer parts, whacked them together in a standardised configuration, and thrown it out the door without much in the way of thought to aesthetics or, again, how the machine would look next to the competition. It's a label Xbox found difficult to shift – one directly addressed with the sleeker design of the follow-up Xbox 360 – and, really, it can't have helped Xbox settle in as a 'true' console.

But that focus on the hardware being PC-ish stretched to the OS too, with the approach behind the scenes – making a system that was much easier to port to from PC – meaning the world of console gaming was suddenly open to PC developers that hadn't previously shown an interest. *Oblivion* on Xbox 360 might have been the *Elder Scrolls* that broke the horse's back, but it was the original Xbox, and *Morrowind*, where Bethesda first got a taste of what bringing its RPG series to consoles could work out like.

Morrowind was clunky and imprecise – still harking back to the previous console generation where PC games were haphazardly crammed into a console's confines, in the most part. But it opened a lot of console players' eyes to the potential; it made a lot of us without the thousand-pound beige boxes aware that there were games beyond endless football-'em-ups and platformers. *Morrowind* was a big one, but the Xbox received ports of other games – games we wouldn't have been daft to assume ➤
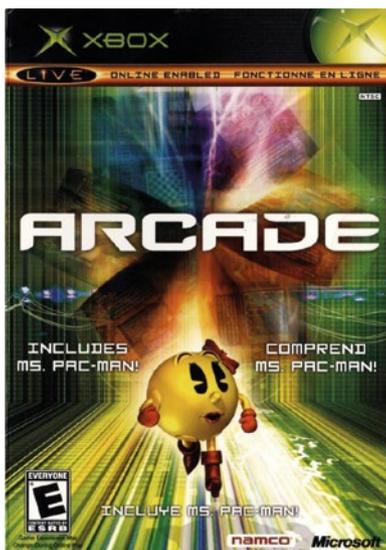

^ Microsoft's first furtive steps into the realm of the always-online, marketplace-driven world of gaming we live in now were limited. But very much present.
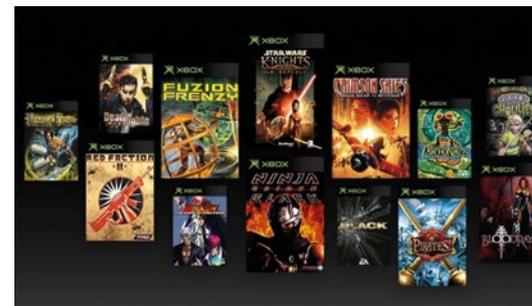
> The game itself might have been a misstep, but the fact *Deus Ex*'s sequel came to Xbox day-and-date with the PC version said a lot about how devs saw the platform and its capabilities.

would have stayed firmly on the PC – like *DOOM 3*, *Half-Life 2*, and *Star Wars Jedi Knight: Jedi Academy*.

Beyond that, plenty of games started coming to both PC and Xbox simultaneously, with versions on each seeing few major differences between them. *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* arrived on Xbox a couple of months before PC – something genuinely bizarre to those of us who

"It all started with a machine that was as ugly as sin"

were accustomed to very different treatment (and very different games) in the early 2000s, while two Ion Storm titles – *Deus Ex: Invisible War* and *Thief: Deadly Shadows* – released day-and-date on both PC and Xbox. Given these two games were hugely anticipated sequels to PC exclusives (and ignoring how they turned out), it was more evidence of a sea-change at play. And that's without even mentioning the *Halo*s and *Ninja Gaiden*s backing up the Xbox with games made purely for the console and later ported elsewhere.

It wasn't all down to the Xbox, of course – the market in general was trending by the early 2000s towards games coming to console first and being ported the way of the PC. Console hardware had reached a point where it was able to pull off what developers wanted to achieve, and in a much more user-friendly realm of controllers and televisions rather than GPUs and

NON-PC PORTS

It wasn't all about the ports coming from and going to the PC – of course, there was a rich ecosystem of games wandering freely between the three major consoles of the era: the Xbox, PS2, and GameCube. It's safe to say, thanks both to its chunky specs and ease with which devs could utilise its hardware, the Xbox tended to get the best version of any multiplatform game. It wasn't true 100% of the time, of course, with notable exceptions like *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* offering a stumble here and there. Largely, though, if you wanted the *best* version of a multiplatform game in the early 2000s, you'd opt for the Xbox version. Unless you only had a Duke controller, in which case you probably tried to play as few games as possible on Xbox because *you valued your hand health*.

▲ **Xbox's 20th anniversary museum is genuinely very well done, and a fantastic (virtual) jog down memory lane.**

manually downloaded patches. It was going that direction anyway. But the Xbox definitely helped things along.

And the Xbox helped along other aspects too – consoles being largely PC-like hardware these days, almost off the shelf and certainly far less bespoke in their components; including a modem as standard (piggybacking off the Dreamcast, of course); and subscription services and online marketplaces like Xbox Live Arcade.

It was all brought together in the original Xbox in a way not seen before, even if individual features had popped up previously, and while the console ended up being just a brief test run for Microsoft – the Xbox 360 launched just four years after the original Xbox – the impact of that first machine is still being felt today.

It opened a lot of doors, and led directly to things like Bethesda being purchased by Microsoft – it's now an Xbox-exclusive developer. Game Pass is the model to emulate, and has made PC-console crossover *the* standard to aspire to. And it all started with a machine that was as ugly as sin, and that plenty of us overlooked back in the day – next to the mini skyscraper PS2 and toaster-with-a-handle GameCube, each with their own wonderful world of more *traditional* console games, the Xbox felt out of place. 20 years later, how wrong we were. Happy anniversary, you giant unwieldy PC in disguise! ⓦ

10 personal
preferences on Xbox

A short run, but lots of great games: it's Microsoft's first console

01

The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind
2002

Bethesda had history on console (see *Home Alone* on NES), but it was *Morrowind* that truly brought the studio into the TV-and-controller realm. The epic RPG was a bit of a clunky port from PC, but it was still both brilliant and popular. *Morrowind* on Xbox showed there was an appetite for the genre beyond its PC niche.
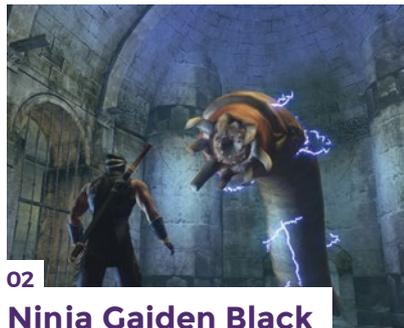

02

Ninja Gaiden Black
2005

Specifically the do-over – *Ninja Gaiden Black* took all the good from 2004's *Ninja Gaiden* and fixed most of the dodgy stuff. The result was a mix of *hardcore* difficulty and absolutely gorgeous looks – the sort of thing that just couldn't be done on other contemporary consoles. Helpfully, it was a good game too.

03

Project Gotham Racing
2001

Hosting the successor to *Metropolis Street Racer* helped solidify the Xbox's reputation as the rightful heir to the Dreamcast's vacated throne. But *Project Gotham Racing* was absolutely its own thing, taking the racing game in a kudos-infused direction that was – and is – incredible fun.
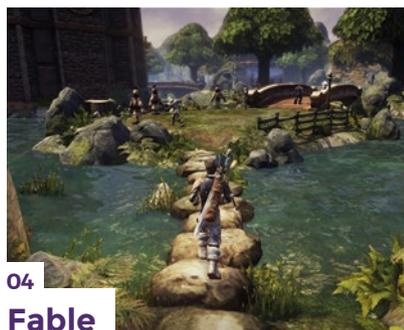
04

Fable
2004

The internet has decided *Fable* was rubbish because we all now hate Peter Molyneux, but that's unfair: the game is still a wonderful, and decidedly British, take on the action-RPG genre. Sure, that acorn might not have grown into a tree as promised, but there's more than enough other good stuff going on to make for a wonderfully atmospheric, and funny, game.

05

Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath
2005

Sent out to die by EA, *Stranger's Wrath* was an Xbox exclusive lost to the ether for many a year. Its numerous re-releases have helped solidify the game's reputation as a true trailblazer since those dark days, but there'll always be that special cadre – that brave few – who first played the game on Xbox and beat the drum for one of *Oddworld*'s finest.

06

Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic
2003

Another shot across the bow for the usual order of things, *KOTOR* was an epic RPG with a huge licence attached from a developer known for PC RPGs… that came to Xbox first. Much has been said of how brilliant a game it was, but less is said on how much this release shifted what was considered the norm in gaming.

07

The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay
2004

How we laughed. A film tie-in starring Vin Diesel: how could it ever be good? By letting Starbreeze in its prime loose on it. *Butcher Bay* nails its licence – you feel like you really are Riddick; a genuine danger even when unarmed. It was also a technical marvel, putting other consoles to shame with its incredible visuals.

08

Crimson Skies: High Road to Revenge
2003

One of the best games never to be re-released or sequelised (at the time of writing, at least), *Crimson Skies* mixed swashbuckling adventure with arcade flight-sim action in what can only be referred to as: a really good game. It also proved that the Xbox could handle more traditional console-y fare as well as PC ports.

09

Half-Life 2
2005

It's hard to see Valve's masterpiece on Xbox as anything other than an attempt to prove it could be done. The port slows down, loads a heck of a lot, and runs as poorly as the lowest-spec PC versions of the day. And yet, it's an absolutely incredible feat, acting as the last hurrah for a console that consistently punched above its weight.

10

Halo 2
2004

Got to mention *Halo*, haven't you? The first game was great, but the second game was the true legend on Xbox: codifying that multiplayer we still enjoy to this day, doubling down on the hard sci-fi fiction backing it all, turning Master Chief into a worldwide icon – *Halo 2* is just brilliant. Shame about that ending, mind.

A load of old balls, please

STEVE MCNEIL

Steve is an old man who thinks things were better in the olden days.

"I used to love a bit of a kickaround with Hitler and Stalin"

Increasingly over the last few years I've been involved behind the scenes on projects where someone is making a show about gaming, but want to avoid making the many horrific mistakes I've made in my own career in the past. Despite essentially being a paid shaming, it's loads of fun.

Recently I've worked on several shows involving *PES*/*eFootball* and *FIFA*, which has necessitated me firing them up and playing every possible mode and tutorial to find what might be the most fun bits to use in an entertainment show. I enjoy this process, as it's always nice when you have that moment of discovery of some obscure little skills training mode tucked away which will lend itself to comedy when the on-screen talent run with it, but it can be quite a slog too, given I have no real interest in football, or football games.

This wasn't always the case. Back in the days of *Sensible Soccer** I used to love nothing more than a bit of a kickaround with Hitler and Stalin on the moon. It was a more innocent time. And the

reason? One button. Defending? Press it to tackle. Attacking? Press it to pass to the nearest player you're looking at. Or, if you're feeling cocky, hold it to hoof it at the goal.

That's your lot. Stick to move, button to kick. I googled *FIFA* controls for contrast and, for attacking alone, it lists THIRTY SIX different things I can do, using various combinations of the left and right sticks and eight buttons. I don't have 36 moves I could confidently use in the bedroom; I'm definitely not investing the time and effort in learning that many for EA.

As fans of football games will know, *FIFA*'s the undisputed king again now that *PES* has made Konami's strange decision to kick the metaphorical ball as hard as it can at the wall, ensuring it rebounds directly into its groin. An absolute shambles of a launch, one can only assume Konami hate money as much as EA clearly love it. I am referring, of course, to the incomprehensible money pit that is 'Ultimate Team'. Chris Bruzzo, the chief experience officer at EA, recently said that "many regulators around the world have concluded that loot boxes do not come under gambling law because you can't win money or cash out". So, gambling with no chance of winning, then? If I wanted that, I could just get drunk and fall asleep at the bingo again.

To be fair, the 'Volta' street football mode in *FIFA* is really fun and more my speed, but what I'd really love to see is something more in the vein of *Super Kick Off* or *Sensible Soccer*. Pure, simple gameplay, with no unnecessary bells and whistles. Not so I'll be any good (I won't be), but so I won't be frustrated that there's a video game I'm worse at than my non-gaming football-mad mates who seem to have learnt all these combos through osmosis.

Why yes, that *is* pathetic – thanks for asking. Ⓦ

* Yes, I am old.**

** Yes, that IS surprising, given how young I look.

⌃ You could argue, in a way, one-button control is *more* technically minded.

Backend Contents

Reviews, retro games, and lots more besides

OUR SCORES

1–9
Trash. Unplayable; a broken mess.

10–19
A truly bad game, though not necessarily utterly broken.

20–29
Still awful, but at a push could be fun for two minutes.

30–39
Might have a redeeming feature, but otherwise very poor.

40–49
Adds in more redeeming features, but still not worth your time.

50–59
Average. Decent at best. 'Just about OK'.

60–69
Held back by glitches, bugs, or a lack of originality, but can be good fun.

70–79
A very good game, but one lacking spit and polish or uniqueness.

80–89
Brilliant. Fabulous fun. Everyone should at least try it.

90–99
Cutting edge, original, unique, and/ or pushes the medium forward.

100
Never say never, eh?

⌃ **Page 93:** Like the movies, the *Guardians of the Galaxy* game is surprisingly good.

PLUS

⌃ **Page 104:** Who would do this? Only a monster. Or Ryan. Find out which, here!

REVIEWED BY
Alexander Chatziioannou

Review

# The Dark Pictures Anthology:
House of Ashes

Bled dry

Much like the crumbling Akkadian statues in the subterranean ruins where most of the carnage in *House of Ashes* takes place, time has not been kind to Supermassive's reputation as the developer that finally nailed down the template for an interactive horror movie. While sticking to the formula established with *Until Dawn*, *The Dark Pictures Anthology* has been growing stale with each instalment. This latest offering is no exception, although the reasons for the slump aren't immediately obvious. This remains comfortably familiar generic fare, populated by an array of recognisable character types that, on various climactic moments, you can either save by pressing the right button at the right time, or watch spectacularly perish, leaving the rest of their story blank, at least until subsequent playthroughs. So what gives?

Set during the 2003 US invasion of Iraq (with a few flashbacks to the 3rd millennium BC), *House of Ashes* retells a timeless narrative of mortal enemies uniting against a common, overwhelming threat. A contingent of American soldiers, including an estranged couple awkwardly reunited and two quarrelsome buddies situated on opposite sides of the ideological spectrum, enter a series of desert caves in hopes of finding Saddam's fabled weapons of mass destruction. Shadowed by a reluctant local conscript (the skirmish between their respective groups triggering the earthquake that launches them, headfirst, inside the catacombs), they find themselves separated and disoriented, in the midst of an ancient necropolis where long-slumbering creatures stir and their companions disappear one by one.

There are clear nods to the spelunking horror of *The Descent*, not least a harrowing trudge through an underground lake of blood that, more or less, recreates that movie's most iconic sequence. But, whereas director Neil Marshall's chiller thrived on the toxic underbelly of its all-
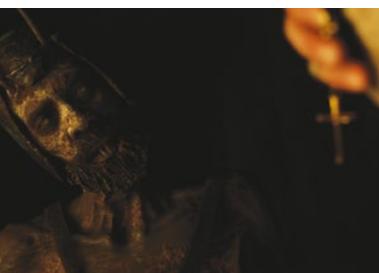
▲ **Do crosses work on Akkadian vampires? As with everything else, it's your choice to make and your consequences to bear.**

▷ **As the team descends deeper into the cave complex, both the architecture and biodiversity change drastically. Is this still Earth?**
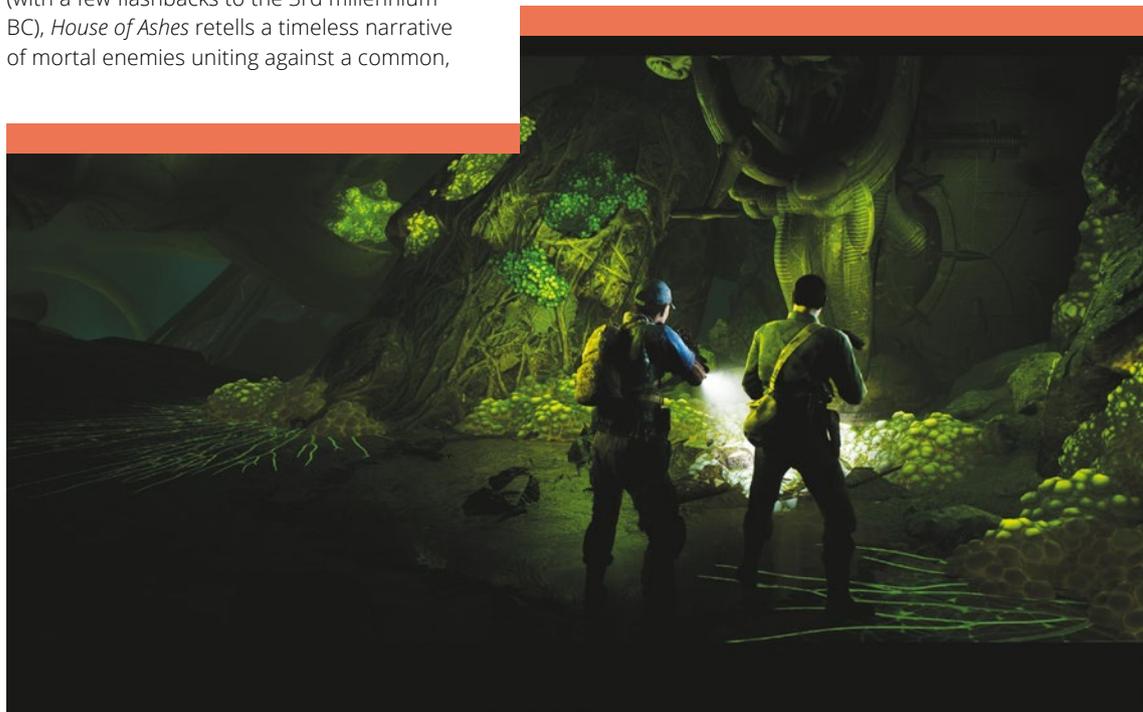
female troupe's interpersonal dynamics, tension in *House of Ashes* feels contrived. The cast of characters is sympathetic, but the bickering Yanks on offer manage to surpass even *Man of Medan*'s insufferable brats for unpleasantness: Colonel King's a bitter, needy child; Rachel's a standoffish career officer, and Kolchek's an out-and-out racist. The stoic Salim fares better but, as the lone Iraqi in a group of outsiders, he inevitably feels like a token inclusion, a concession to Supermassive's milquetoast notion of "progressiveness". The latter conceit collapses promptly after Salim's superior is painted as the most heinous villain in the game, a caricature of the bloodthirsty Arab, complete with maniacal laughter at the death of infidels and no scruples about sacrificing his own people.

Still, political naïveté and literary deficiencies aside, the formula remains sturdy enough to provide an intriguing first journey – at least when the cogs stay in place. Agonising over the long-term repercussions of your choices is as fun as ever and quick time events are sensibly placed, governed by a range of difficulty options that make it easier to tailor the experience to your liking – unlike previous instalments, I never felt a character death was unfair here. The newly liberated camera is a double-edged sword, contributing to a more direct engagement with the Mesopotamian undercity but, at the same time, underlining how little there is to do there, other than scour its ancient tunnels for the occasional secret and collectable.

On the other hand, while the motion-capture technology behind the series could only have evolved in the last half-decade, *House of Ashes* remains, somehow, more firmly stuck in the uncanny valley than any of its predecessors, with facial expressions often appearing forced

> **"There are clear nods to the spelunking horror of *The Descent*"**

and unnatural. And the immersion is further disrupted by a variety of glitches: persistent flickering, unsynchronised audio, and, most distractingly, a mouse pointer spontaneously popping up on the screen and refusing to go.

But the crucial reason why a once-vibrant template increasingly registers like a humdrum Halloween tradition, not entirely unwelcome but lifeless and predictable, is that the studio's former penchant for cleverly subverting horror tropes has been abandoned for undiscerning, homogenised genre fodder. Where *Until Dawn* distinguished itself by upturning every convention in the teen-slasher playbook and by injecting a dash of complexity into stock personality types, *House of Ashes* tries to provoke a reaction through telegraphed jump scares and piling on the shocks ("Wait, those creatures are both demons *and* vampires?"). At the end of the five-hour feature, a ridiculously neat denouement that sees the surviving members of your team emerge into the light feels rushed and unearned, cementing the impression of a series drained of all vitality. Like a pre-carved pumpkin, *The Dark Pictures* has turned into rote annual service, rather than the love letter to cinematic horror the series was intended as. Ⓦ
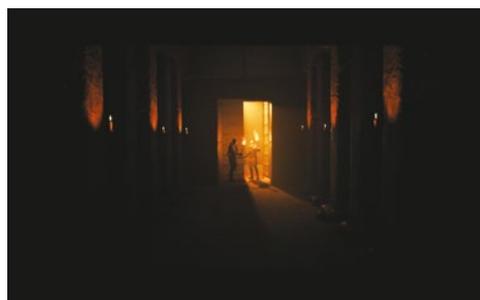
HIGHLIGHT

As the demon colony that has slept for centuries erupts, near the end of the game, the action starts rapidly switching between characters. It's a simple but effective device that perfectly captures the chaos of the situation – the kind of inspired blending of narrative and mechanics the series could use more of.

VERDICT

Regurgitating rather than subverting familiar horror tropes, *House of Ashes* is an adequate, if eminently forgettable, distraction.

54%

Defeat These Punks Again
Main Story

HIGHLIGHT

While the mainline *Yakuza* games are now turn-based battles, returning to real-time brawling in *Lost Judgment* feels wonderfully fresh, especially as Yagami's fighting animations flow more smoothly than before. Best of all is the new Snake style, which specialises in counters. If the conditions are right, you can perform EX moves that scare enemies into submission.

Lost Judgment

The school of hard knocks, but you get to do the knocking

Info

GENRE
Action /
Detective thriller

FORMAT
PS5 (tested) / XB X/S
/ PS4 / XBO

DEVELOPER
RGG Studio

PUBLISHER
Sega

PRICE
£49.99

RELEASE
Out now

SOCIAL
@RGGStudio

REVIEWED BY
Alan Wen

VERDICT

A vastly improved sequel and hopefully not the last we'll hear from Yagami.

80%

Lost Judgment is like two games in one – and then some, once you start counting the various minigames, including a large collection of Master System classics. The *Yakuza* series, of which this is a spin-off, has always been known for deftly swinging from serious melodrama to zany comedy, but it's never been so keenly split as with lawyer-turned-detective Takayuki Yagami's new case. At first, he finds himself in the same neighbourhood of Yokohama as in *Yakuza: Like a Dragon*, going undercover at a private high school to investigate claims of bullying. This, however, intertwines with a seemingly open-and-shut sexual assault trial that uncovers a gruesome murder and more buried secrets.

Getting entangled in convoluted plot threads is a Yakuza speciality that fits better in the perspective of a professional sleuth, but *Lost Judgment*'s themes of suicide and bullying also hit a lot more raw nerves, including a few particularly upsetting scenes. Yet despite being a series that practically trades in tonal whiplash, the subject matter is treated with the seriousness it demands, even going as far as discussing the prehistoric origins of bullying. In any case, the game tries to offer more interesting solutions than simply having you smack some no-good delinquents around, while also wading into the murky greys of retributive justice when the law fails to protect.

In parallel to this are School Stories, which sees Yagami doing his best 'how do you do fellow kids' routine infiltrating school clubs as an 'outside counsellor' to track down a mystery villain while also helping students face their own problems. They're like the Social Links of the *Persona* games, except they're arguably more engaging for having their own substantial minigames. It'd be inaccurate to call these a complete contrast to the main story since some still deal in pretty heavy themes, even if you're also partaking in rhythm action dancing, a fairly deep version of *Robot Wars*, and even trying to 'git gud' in a *Virtua Fighter 2* tournament.

However, the main case is just so gripping and tightly paced that it reaches a point where you're less likely to be distracted, especially as some School Stories take a bit more of a grind for more to unlock. It's for that reason I would advise saving these for the post-game, and considering these also have post-launch DLC, the developers probably feel the same way.

Of course, for those who want a slice of virtual tourism, that's still possible – even better now that your first-person mode comes with a zoom-in function to better appreciate the detailed environments. Ultimately, *Lost Judgment*'s biggest strength comes from having one of the most gripping stories of the year that's more bingeable than the latest Netflix crime drama. Yes, it's definitely a bit less cerebral than a detective game like *Paradise Killer*, but as someone who doesn't want an obtuse puzzle to kill the drama's momentum, I have no objections on that front. ⓦ

A quality soundtrack can do wonders, and *Guardians*' licensed soundtrack, from '*I Ran*' to '*Every 1's a Winner*' to '*Bad Reputation*', is simply the business. Heard diegetically on board the Guardians' ship, the Milano, a song is also played during super-charged Huddles that buffs your party in combat, while certain set pieces have a specific song cued. Just do yourself a favour and don't play this while streaming.

Review

Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy

What the flark

Sidestepping comparisons with the MCU, Square Enix's *Guardians of the Galaxy* brings its own distinct spin on the tale of a band of alien misfits' intergalactic adventures. It tells a terrific, original, well-paced story that starts small (our heroes have to pay a fine) and spirals into a bid to save the galaxy – all without losing its strong emotional through line.

In particular, its relatively unknown voice cast brilliantly equip themselves in the roles of Peter Quill/Star-Lord, Gamora, Drax, Rocket, and even Groot. You're never really thinking you're in the company of understudies as with last year's *Marvel's Avengers* – and given this is one project that *doesn't* involve Chris Pratt… well, it's got to count for something.

Perhaps the biggest difference with Earth's mightiest is that *Guardians* doesn't get mired in the mess of games-as-a-service and is instead that rare triple-A treat: a tight, linear, no-frills single-player campaign. Its role-playing aspects are light touch at best and its dialogue choices don't quite make this Marvel's *Mass Effect*, since it ultimately revolves around Quill doing his best to be a good leader and earn the trust of a newly formed team. Indeed, you'll enjoy simply listening to the Guardians' banter with one another, and goodness there's a ton of dialogue in here with nary a quiet moment. In other games, this would soon grate, with far too many soliloquising protagonists or someone talking at you via radio, but there's something hugely refreshing about *Guardians*' group dynamic, and there are so many lines that barely any are repeated.

This does, however, cover up what's otherwise pretty basic about *Guardians*' mechanics. While there are some impressive environments and a decent supporting cast (Lady Hellbender steals the few scenes she's in), there's a real *Uncharted* vibe to proceedings as you're usually just pushing up on the stick. The things you get up to are predictable enough: there are sliding sequences and irritating squeezes through tight spaces, the latter poorly visible on a few occasions. Combat is almost secondary, feeling like a shallow party-based real-time JRPG, except you can't swap between characters. Instead, Star-Lord calls the shots *for* his teammates using cooldown-based skills, and you'll likely just mash whichever is available. Even though Star-Lord has a couple of cool tricks, from a *Gears*-like active reload for his blasters to a *Vanquish*-inspired slide, it's all a bit too fiddly, especially as it's too easy to accidentally click on the left stick and activate his own abilities.

Ultimately, you can coast through *Guardians* without much thought. But the production values, charming dialogue, and interplay between the cast stops any serious complaints from arising. One suggestion, though: maybe throw out some PEGI 16-rated DLC so the Guardians can just swear, instead of saying 'flark' all the time. ⓦ

> **"There's a ton of dialogue in here with nary a quiet moment"**

Info

GENRE
Action adventure/ RPG

FORMAT
PC / PS5 (tested) / XB S/X / PS4 / XBO / Switch

DEVELOPER
Eidos-Montréal

PUBLISHER
Square Enix

PRICE
£49.99

RELEASE
Out now

SOCIAL
@gotgthegame

REVIEWED BY
Alan Wen

VERDICT

Story and performances elevate otherwise bog-standard mechanics to a pretty flarking good time.

76%

Info

GENRE
First-person horror

FORMAT
PS5 (tested) / PC /
XB S/X / Switch

DEVELOPER
We Create Stuff

PUBLISHER
Modus Games

PRICE
£29.99

RELEASE
Out now

SOCIAL
@insoundmindgame

REVIEWED BY
Jon Bailes

VERDICT

An original horror game impaired by its own ambition.

58%

Review

In Sound Mind

Running out of patients

A dead end isn't always a dead end in *In Sound Mind*. Turn to retrace your steps and things can suddenly change. The mannequin you last saw way across the room, for example, might be hovering right behind you, helpfully offering a key. Then again, progress isn't always progress either. Not when a spiteful old man keeps materialising to sabotage your efforts – shutting down the lift you're riding in, or shoving you away from the window you've climbed up to reach. For better or worse, there's no denying that *In Sound Mind* has a strong sense of mischief.

You are Desmond Wales, a therapist stuck in a parallel reality polluted with crates of toxic ooze and shadowy monsters. From his apartment block hub, you must find and enter magic portals to visit four locations – a department store, a lighthouse, a factory, a forest – each a site where one of his clients mysteriously died, to unravel the causes of their tragic declines. The result is a sort of straight-to-video *Resident Evil* where the puzzles take precedence – find three chemicals to make an experimental drug, and so on – and because they do, they're often engagingly complex. There's also a hint of *Metroid*, both in navigating intricate routes of pipes, vents, and hazards, and securing permanent equipment that dissolves barriers you couldn't cross before.

It's a solid base, and *In Sound Mind* exploits the variety of its locations well, ensuring you're always doing something different. Yet in covering

> **"The result is a sort of straight-to-video *Resident Evil*"**

so much ground, it often becomes uneven and irksome. Combat, although infrequent, is a nuisance, as packs of shadows run at you erratically, draining your life while you try to land headshots. Controls and collisions are imprecise, whether you're trying to make jumps or pick up items, and without an inventory wheel, switching between, say, your torch and gun under pressure is a hassle. Visually, it can be confusing, too, with a lot of murk and some severe lighting and flashing effects.

More contentious still, however, is *In Sound Mind*'s most ambitious feature – each stage hosts a monstrous embodiment of Desmond's ex-patient that tries to hunt you down. It works fine first time, as you're pursued by a ghost that can't stand to see her own reflection. But by the third area, where you're harassed by a giant angry motorised bull skull, things have become very messy indeed. It's a brave move by developer We Create Stuff to include such a large enemy charging around smashing through scenery like, well, a bull in a china shop, but feels ill-judged when it obstructs your attempts to solve puzzles, and certainly when it repeatedly causes the game to crash.

In Sound Mind deserves respect for its big ideas, then, but might have done better to lower its sights and trust in its puzzles to offer sufficient challenge. While it feels harsh to criticise a game that shows creative drive, it lacks the technical chops to fully impress its impish personality. Ⓦ

Review

Song in the Smoke

No bones about it, life was harder way back when

HIGHLIGHT

It's the little physical actions that really keep you immersed in *Song in the Smoke*'s world, like using your knife to file wooden sticks into arrows, or crushing fruits with a pestle and mortar. For the latter, when you put the restorative juices to your lips, your caveperson avatar makes a satisfying glugging sound.

There are plenty of ways to meet your untimely demise in *Song in the Smoke*. Starvation, poisoning, bleeding, freezing. More often than not, you'll die at the teeth of deadly predators whose vicious mauling has broken your puny club, and torn apart the precious protective clothing you've spent days putting together from beasts lower on the food chain. Managing stats in merciless conditions are par for the course in any survival game, but in VR it's magnified into something else entirely.

This is bold new territory for the previously retro-inspired studio 17-Bit; its experience carves a fresh niche, and is also longer than your typical VR campaign. That length will vary based on how adept you are at surviving the prehistoric wild – or whether you have the stomach for it. While *Song in the Smoke*'s story is elusive, the structure's straightforward. Each lush open area you enter has three singing stones to be found, which then spawn a spirit animal that has to be hunted, before a portal opens up to whisk you off to the next area. If you know where to find these stones, it's a task that could theoretically be achieved in a matter of minutes – but it's complicated by other priorities, like staying alive.

For starters, you'll want to build a campsite – the only way to save progress – and keep yourself fed. Berries or mushrooms can only sustain for so long, so you'll need to craft weapons to hunt animals (sorry, vegetarians), both for food and various other resources required for further crafting. Some tasks that seem trivial in a typical survival game take longer to get used to when you're performing physical actions rather than just pressing buttons, and conditions are such that you never really feel particularly overpowered.

Just the effort required to survive a single day can be painstaking, especially as carving spoils from prey also advances the in-game clock, and if you find yourself without a torch and far from camp when night falls, you really are at the mercy of the darkness and whatever's lurking out there. Even back at camp, you're literally burning your resources before the sun comes up and you're back to being hungry. Indeed, it'll likely take time before you feel confident enough to explore and track down those aforementioned stones.

It's a shame the combat isn't particularly deep, and so prone to repetition: you're limited to just a bow and club, though gathering better materials means you can craft more durable versions of these as you go on. Still, *Song in the Smoke*'s world is one worth savouring, and it's this aspect that makes it such a special VR game; its visuals may be minimal, but its ambient audio really heightens the immersion. The biggest thrill is the moment you lock eyes with an apex predator standing a few yards away, and you wait for that primal fight or flight instinct to kick in. ⓦ

▼ As part of its weird yet wonderful UI, the number of arrows you're carrying is displayed as tallies etched on your bow.

VERDICT

An absorbing VR world to exist in, if you can survive its brutality.

71%

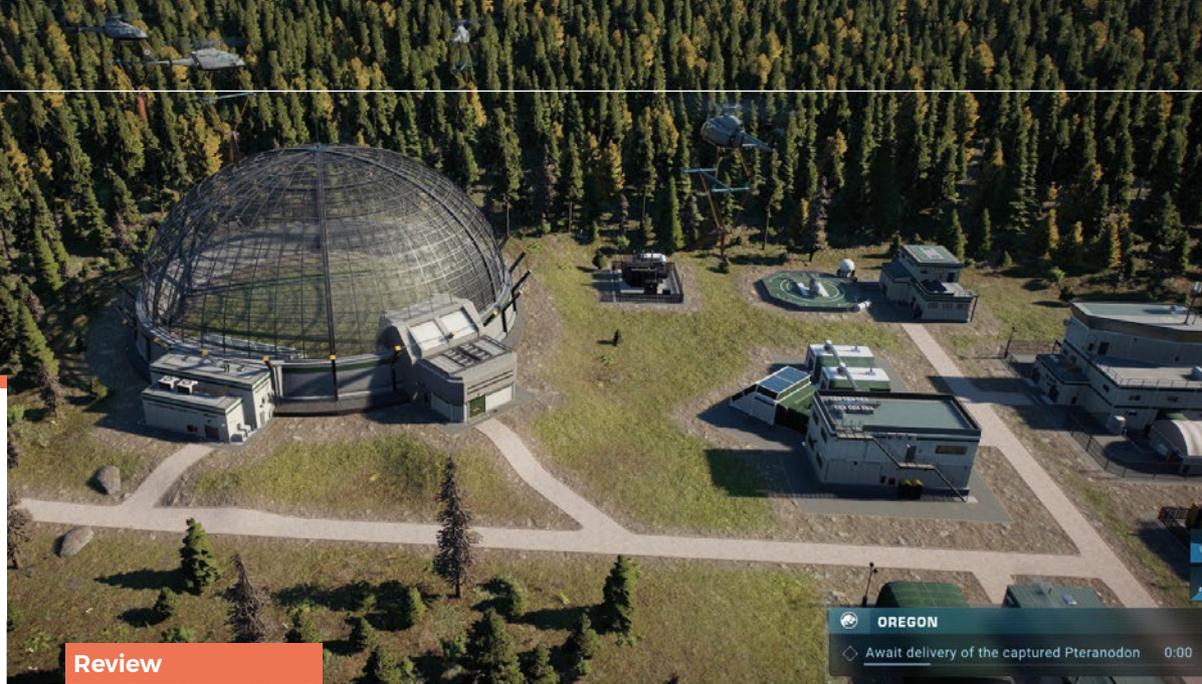**HIGHLIGHT**

Frontier's gorgeously rendered and animated dinosaurs are still a stunning achievement, and the descriptions in first-person view of the jeep tour are a lovely touch.

▲ **Yes, you can name the dinos. This is Barry.**

OREGON
◇ Await delivery of the captured Pteranodon   0:00

Review

Jurassic World Evolution 2

I dino what to tell ya

Info

GENRE
Life finds a way-'em-up

FORMAT
PC (tested) / PS5 / XB S/X / PS4 / XBO

DEVELOPER
Frontier Developments

PUBLISHER
Frontier Developments

PRICE
£49.99

RELEASE
Out now

SOCIAL
@frontierdev

REVIEWED BY
Nic Reuben

VERDICT

It's better than the original *Jurassic World Evolution*. Make of that what you will.

58%

Jurassic World Evolution 2 launched three years after the original game, allegedly. Remember 2018? Of course you don't. No one does. But I can recall a vague sensation of excitement followed by sinking disappointment that year. *Jurassic World Evolution* came out, too. Three 'years' later (if the famously corrupt 'Big Clock' is to be trusted), we have a sequel. It makes some incredibly welcome improvements, scrubbing away meddlesome mobile game-style timers and offering more creativity. It's still not the game I was hoping for.

Honestly? I have no one to blame but myself. It's taken me two games to realise that my imaginary, platonic 'Dinosaur Park Tycoon', with Bullfrog charm but Frontier's gorgeous dinos, is never what these games were trying to be. They don't want to be quirky nineties management games with modern flair. They want to be cinematic. Reverent. Tense. They want you to love all the *JP* movies as much, if not more, than the idea of running a dinosaur theme park. To me, that's a hard sell.

The campaign here is really more of a tutorial. Five or so hours of showing you the ropes, although strangely not all of them, with an abrupt conclusion. The new Chaos Mode, with its 'what if?' film-inspired scenarios, is a stronger offering. Structured objectives both teach the game and challenge your management skills. I seem to remember there was a film about trying to control chaos, though. *Planet Zoo/Coaster*'s creativity here plays second fiddle to rapid problem solving, putting out metaphorical fires and actual

dino rampages. Sandbox and Challenge modes complete the set.

Still, I really cannot overstate how gorgeous it all is, again. The greatest joys the game offers still lie in zooming the camera nostril-close to a triceratops as it tussles with its cellmates. In watching flying dinos perch on aviary viewing booths, or velociraptors chase down goats. These are the most beautiful and varied dinos ever to wave their comically tiny arms inside a video game. Sometimes, the sheer joy of being able to care for them, even within a sim that is often tediously workmanlike, is enough.

Elsewhere, nothing feels innovative, novel, or particularly exciting. Expression and creativity give way to min-maxing and micromanagement. Sabotage events and storms pop up, creating problems. You play whack-a-mole, then try to get back to just enjoying your dinos before the next catastrophe rears its fun-hating head.

It is not Frontier's fault that, over time, the licence has become the Hoover to the vacuum-cleaner high-concept of a dino park, and so anything they could make would always be held up to standards it wasn't necessarily aiming for. *JWE 2* is a faithful *JP* game that I'm confident franchise fans will get a lot more out of than I did. It makes some solid improvements over the original, even if the end product feels less dramatic than some patches for other titles. But I'd recommend asking yourself if you're actually a *JP* fan, or just love the idea of managing your own personal dino park. Turns out I'm not the *JP* fan I thought I was. ⓦ

Puttering across the sea and venturing into the different biomes of the ocean is pure joy. This small voxel vessel seems full of character despite the lack of graphical fidelity. It's a toy in your hands; you feel like a kid shoving and twirling among the shadows of fish, squid, and crustaceans.

Review

Moonglow Bay

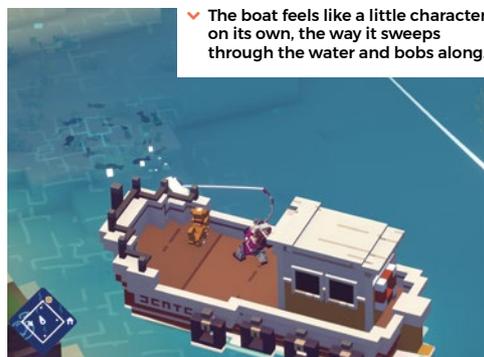This cosy, voxel fishing sim proves to be quite a catch

Once you pull your boat out of the repair dock in Moonglow Bay, the game opens up properly. Before that, there's the poignant backstory of Mr or Mrs Fisher losing their partner to the turbulent sea; stepping into their shoes, we tidy up their grief-filled house and grab a fishing-rod to cast off the end of the pier behind it. You learn which buttons to hold to reel in fish; how to manipulate the left stick to fight the tension of the line; and how to earn some shells (the game's currency). At this point, you can pay off the repair bill on the boat and strike out against the waves.

Getting your boat back gives you the freedom of the sea. You can exit the ship onto the deck, where you can cast your rod or net freely. Time ticks along, the game hands out tasks to further the story – which is full of heart though sometimes too saccharine; Moonglow residents hand out new fishing rods, baits, lobster-traps, and upgrades for your boat.

Back at home – or later, on the boat – you're required to cook meals using the fish you catch, which can be sold outside your house. Cooking the various dishes is broken down into minigames which require some timed button presses or movements of the left stick. Washing the fish, for example, asks you to keep a cursor inside a moving square. Nail each step and the dish will be given three stars, though it never really feels like those steps are difficult: citizens still buy the food, and you'll still earn money.

Moonglow Bay feels like a living and breathing town, with plenty of tall tales of mysterious fish living out in the bay. There's a museum with empty aquariums which must be filled, a tech shop which sells equipment, and the repair dock. As you earn more money, you can refurbish some of the shops and houses in town, which then boosts the number of shells you earn.

The cycle of fishing, cooking, and chatting to residents can feel a touch repetitive after a few hours, particularly when cooking lots of dishes at once. But repetition is often key to these games, and the story beats can break up any monotony that threatens to set in. Everything feels refreshingly simple in *Moonglow*; aside from losing the odd fish, there's no sense of danger or failure. There may be times when the game feels pulled between its story and life on the sea, but there's undoubtedly plenty of heart in this cosy sim. Ⓦ

The boat feels like a little character on its own, the way it sweeps through the water and bobs along.

REVIEWED BY
Daniel Lipscombe

VERDICT

Moonglow's gameplay mechanics aren't sushi-fresh, but it's a tasty dish full of heart and soul.

74%

Review

I'm not garbage!

⌃ Wonderfully horrific, Burtonesque creature design stops just short of genuinely disturbing. Mostly.

Lost in Random

Can you pet the dice?

Info

GENRE
Action adventure

FORMAT
PC (tested) / PS5 / XB S/X / PS4 / XBO / Switch

DEVELOPER
Zoink

PUBLISHER
EA

PRICE
£24.99

RELEASE
Out now

SOCIAL
@ZoinkGames

REVIEWED BY
Nic Reuben

VERDICT

Combat is a bit dicey, but *Lost in Random* evens the odds with unrestrained imagination, wonderfully witty writing, and whimsical world-building.

78%

There's an array of influences evident in Zoink's latest game, but to belabour any of them would undersell just how alight with its own vision this extraordinary modern fairy tale feels. A Dickensian world of jagged shadows and ramshackle towns houses a cast of creepy-cute cloth puppets, somewhere between Tim Burton and Jim Henson. Writing that often channels early Pixar, witty quips for parents and younger gamers to grin together at. Gothic but not moody, *Lost in Random* invites all the monsters under the bed to surface. Some try to steal you away, others just tell you their problems. You'll likely end up with a soft spot for most of them before the journey ends.

The story follows Even in her quest to save her sister Odd from the wicked queen of Random. Even is Alice as a Wonderland local: street savvy and headstrong. Random's districts are socially stratified; castes are decided by a throw of the die, from Even's home of Onecroft to the illustrious Sixtopia.
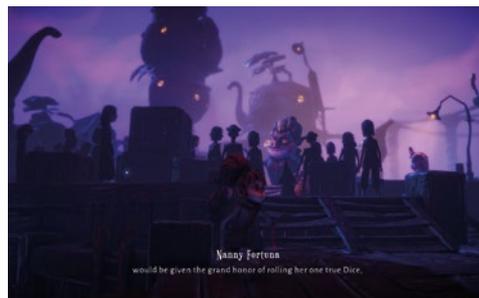
Even's got a wicked aim with a slingshot, and she isn't alone: you'll soon meet the six-sided Dicey, who gurgles in a language only Even understands, and their chemistry is infectious. He's no slouch in combat, either, even if combat itself is a missed opportunity.

Even will begin fights by chipping crystals from enemies with her slingshot, collecting them to power up Dicey, who can then be thrown. Time freezes, and Dicey's result powers up Even's card collection. Card effects range from summoning weapons and bombs to healing. It is, effectively, an elaborate form of weapon selection. Visually, fights are thematic and lively, but rarely thrilling, particularly as Even and Dicey will repeatedly face the same enemies in protracted encounters. For all its veneer of strategy and deck-building, this is plasticky combat, with little heft to the hits and unsatisfying timing to the dodges.

I'd love these fights to be something special, especially as they're so frequent. Judging a game on how I assume it might feel to play for someone else is where madness lies; I feel a younger target audience won't mind half as much. Great combat isn't too hard to come by, but such a surplus of wit and imagination makes this story a rare gem.

It shines with timeless fairy tale resonance on one hand, and sparkles with stunningly modern rendering and art direction on the other. You buy new cards from a chap who is also a cupboard, called Mannie Dex. Even travels between districts on a giant, steam-powered snail. There's too much strange and wonderful artistry to call it random, but it's still easy to get lost in. ⓦ

Nanny Fortana
would be given the grand honor of rolling her one true Dice.

2 HITS

RUMI
57/100
99/100
1   37

Review

Tunche

Stumble in the jungle

There's a certain bravery in attempting a roguelike scrolling beat 'em up – a genre that often struggles to alleviate repetition tied to a format that demands it. *Tunche* has its work cut out, then, as it tries to make the two compatible. Yet after a positive start, it serves to illustrate the antagonism.

In essence, *Tunche* is a kind of *Streets of Rage* and *Hades* amalgam. Its structure follows Supergiant's roguelike hit, with branching routes leading to different rewards, upgrades to unlock between runs, and storylines that unveil as you progress. In between all that stands a series of arenas, or rather clearings in the Amazon jungle, where you beat the stuffing out of waves of corrupted wildlife.

Off the bat it feels good. The hand-drawn scenery is sharp, funky panpipe tunes establish a galloping rhythm, and your chosen fighter (from a roster of five) darts and jabs with satisfying slickness. Initial movesets are limited, but level a character up a bit and you'll have an impressive arsenal to switch between, and once you're into the nitty-gritty, *Tunche* makes it easy to perform with style, linking combos, projectile attacks, dashes, launchers, and air assaults at speed.

Tactically, however, it's rather limited. Under the watchful eye of a combo meter that resets if you stop hitting things for two seconds, *Tunche* comes to feel like an aerobics workout for the fingers. And, like exercise, as an activity in itself, it can become exhausting and monotonous. That's mainly down to a complete absence of scenery furniture that either helps or hinders your efforts, and lethargic critters that only pose problems when multiple species combine in numbers. Knocking fat frogs about gets dull after three screens, yet a new army of them awaits with every restart. After only a handful of expeditions, the first half of the game demands no concentration at all.

In *Hades*, such slack is reduced as each run throws up unique synergies of randomised power-ups – something that *Tunche* is unable to replicate. Stage rewards come in the shape of currencies to spend during or between runs, and a smattering of perks that change very little. An upgrade that occasionally causes range attacks to slow down enemies, for example, feels superficial when most foes aren't highly mobile in the first place, and you don't know when it will trigger. Mostly, your choice of route feels irrelevant, especially when you can buy favoured boons from shops anyway.

There remains an infectious exuberance in *Tunche*'s presentation and tight control, not to mention the joyful chaos of a four-player local co-op mode. In terms of injecting replayability into its genre, however, it's hard not to view it as a wrong turn, especially since *Streets of Rage 4*'s Survival mode has shown a more fruitful path forward. *Tunche* has the moves, but lacks the discipline of a true fighter. Ⓦ

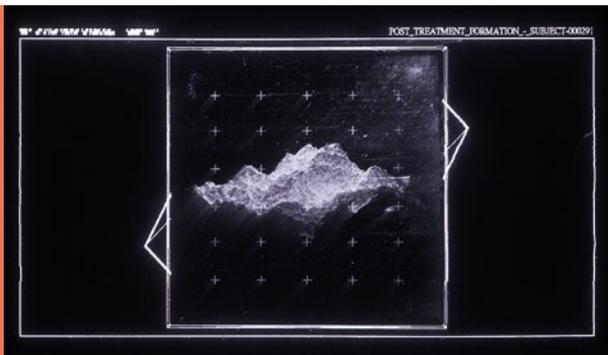> **"Knocking fat frogs about gets dull after three screens"**

VERDICT

Strong visuals and slick combat, but short on depth and variety.

52%

Itch.io roundup

Picking out some of the platform's standout titles | **REVIEWED BY** Nic Reuben


Project Forlorn

synthcoder / Name your own / **wfmag.cc/forlorn**

OK, so this rules. I mean, everything here is great; that's why I include it. But man, this rules. It's part visual accompaniment to a vast, alien electronic soundtrack, part exploration of a deeply cursed setting. All packaged as an operating system for a sinister entity known as the Wednesday Research Association. A labyrinthine interface obscures simple navigation, making even a few arrow key clicks feel like excavating something forbidden. Throw it on during a party and watch your guests get hypnotised, then swallowed by the monitor.

Time is Solid Here

Algebra Falcon / Name your own / **wfmag.cc/TiSH**

Ever wanted to explore a desolate art gallery filled with uncanny, distorted paintings, trying to clean them all at the request of a face merged with a hand so that he'll explain why you're here in the first place? Me neither, honestly, but the stunning soundtrack and 'I'm not quite sure what I'm looking at, but I'm deeply unnerved by it" visuals here convinced me. A short narrative experience that deals evocatively with heavy themes.
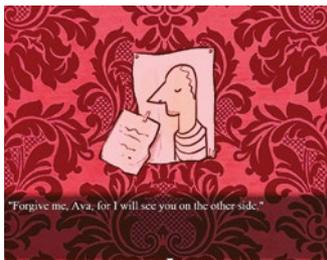
Indiepocalypse #23

Various / $15.00 / **wfmag.cc/indiepocalypse**

Realistically, I could have included any issue of Indiepocalypse here. But the stars aligned, spelling out a giant '23', and here we are. Currently approaching its second anniversary, this monthly zine offers a curated collection of gourmet indies, plus the zine itself. Indiepocalypse prides itself on its ethos to make sure each contributor is paid fairly for their work. #23 features eleven games, ranging from meditative vignettes to visual novels, platformers to interactive fiction. The inimitable alienmelon's Electric Zine Maker is included this month, too.

Machine Gun Fury

Reset Games Limited / Name your own / **wfmag.cc/MGF**

I'm often put off by the difficulty of *Commando*-esque military shooters. Nice of *Machine Gun Fury*, then, to let my Stallone-lookalike character hop into a tank in the first five minutes of this work-in-progress arcade throwback. Moreish, frantic, and topped off with some highly satisfying screams of pained fear from your foes. Soundtrack's great, too. I don't know why palm trees explode when I drive over them, but I'm sure it only adds to the experience. Ⓦ

The bonus title this month is pure nepotism, towards myself. Yes, I made a thing. Backwoods Cartography (**wfmag.cc/backwoods**) is a system-neutral TTRPG sourcebook. If you like words, you might also like this.

▶ STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Alice 'Grimsevers' Liguori offers up a few less-than-grim answers this month

What's your favourite game?
It's really hard for me to pinpoint my one favourite game. I always say that *Skyrim*, *The Sims*, and *Portal 2* are my absolute favourite games because they cover all the genres I love. I've been playing *The Sims* since it first came out, and I still play *The Sims 4* now. *Portal* made me realise I was actually quite good at puzzle games, *Portal 2* made me laugh a lot while I played, and *Skyrim* I've purchased more times than I'd like to admit (not always for myself!), but I didn't know I liked RPGs until I played *Skyrim*.

If you absolutely, positively had to choose, which one of those games resonates the most with you?
If I had to choose one of the three games to be my favourite, let's go for *The Sims*. I'd have to say that I love it as much as I do because there's so much choice in how you can play. When I was younger I was very much a gameplay person, but these days I sit for hours and hours just building, furnishing, and designing interiors to my heart's content. There are so many different ways you can play *The Sims* (OK, well three really), and I think that's what makes it so wonderful – everyone plays it differently.

What game was it that got you into gaming to begin with? What are your enduring memories of it?
I think the one that really got me into gaming in a more serious way was *Super Mario 64*. My uncle gave me my first console, a Nintendo 64 – before then, I'd been a PC gamer, before I even knew that there was a difference – and I played *Super Mario 64* to completion numerous times. I've recently tried re-playing it on my Switch, and as it turns out, my hands just can't figure out the controls anymore. I played a lot of Barbie games too; *Barbie Secret Agent* definitely awakened the stealth archer in me, and *Barbie Super Sports* got me into *SSX Tricky*. Thanks, Barbie.

Has there ever been a point where you've been put off gaming?
There was a time when I worked in the games media industry and I didn't play games for about two years in my own free time. I would only play games for work; it ruined my enjoyment. I would come home and not want to sit at my PC or console. It was a really horrible period for me.

What's the appeal of playing games for an audience?
I only really wanted to stream to get through my backlog of indies and other games I didn't get round to playing (namely ones that I missed out on in my two-ish years dry spell of absolutely hating video games), so please don't look at my most streamed games being *The Sims 4* and *Skyrim*, because I simply have nothing to say about it – they're comfort games, OK?!

Community management [is difficult]. But even with all of that, the appeal of playing games for an audience is the community, the discussion, the friendships you see forming among viewers. ⓦ

Alice streams on Tuesdays and Thursdays at 7pm, and Sundays at 10am (all BST): **wfmag.cc/grim**

"Barbie Super Sports got me into SSX Tricky. Thanks, Barbie"

The Wireframe HOTLIST

The best PC games, according to Wireframe,
catering for whatever your mood might be

The games for... BIG ADVENTURES

Assassin's Creed Odyssey / Ubisoft / **93%** (Issue 1)

Yakuza: Like a Dragon / Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio / **90%** (Issue 45)

Amnesia: Rebirth / Frictional Games / **87%** (Issue 46)

Death's Door / Acid Nerve / **87%** (Issue 55)

The Last Campfire / Hello Games / **86%** (Issue 47)

Resident Evil 2 / Capcom / **86%** (Issue 7)

Journey to the Savage Planet / Typhoon Studios / **84%** (Issue 33)

The Outer Worlds / Obsidian Entertainment / **84%** (Issue 28)

Eastward / Pixpil / **84%** (Issue 57)

Monster Boy and the Cursed Kingdom
/ Game Atelier / **84%** (Issue 6)

The games for... REPEATED PLAY

Hades / Supergiant Games / **94%** (Issue 44)

They Are Billions / Numantian Games / **88%** (Issue 20)

Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice / FromSoftware / **87%** (Issue 11)

Streets of Rage 4 / DotEmu/Lizardcube/Guard Crush / **86%** (Issue 40)

📷 **Trials of Fire** / Whatboy Games / **84%** (Issue 50)

Katamari Damacy REROLL / Monkeycraft / **84%** (Issue 4)

Spelunky 2 / Mossmouth / **83%** (Issue 44)

Hitman 2 / IO Interactive / **82%** (Issue 3)

Alba: A Wildlife Adventure / ustwo Games / **82%** (Issue 46)

Slay the Spire / Mega Crit Games / **81%** (Issue 45)

The games for... SOLID STORY TIMES

Disco Elysium / ZA/UM / **94%** (Issue 28)

📷 **Life is Strange: True Colors** / Deck Nine / **89%** (Issue 57)

Mutazione / Die Gute Fabrik / **86%** (Issue 26)

Whispers of a Machine
/ Clifftop Games/Faravid Interactive / **85%** (Issue 14)

The Forgotten City / Modern Storyteller / **85%** (Issue 55)

Mythic Ocean / Paralune / **84%** (Issue 36)

Sunless Skies / Failbetter Games / **83%** (Issue 7)

Arise: A Simple Story / Piccolo Studio / **82%** (Issue 31)

Assemble with Care / ustwo Games / **81%** (Issue 27)

The Walking Dead: The Final Season
/ Telltale Games/Skybound Games / **81%** (Issue 11)

The games for... FIRING UP BRAIN CELLS

Telling Lies / Sam Barlow / **92%** (Issue 24)

Kentucky Route Zero / Cardboard Computer / **90%** (Issue 33)

Slipways / Beetlewing / **90%** (Issue 53)

Heaven's Vault / inkle / **89%** (Issue 12)

The Pedestrian / Skookum Arts / **84%** (Issue 35)

The Legend of Bum-Bo / Edmund McMillen / **83%** (Issue 31)

A Monster's Expedition / Draknek & Friends / **82%** (Issue 47)

Total War: Three Kingdoms
/ Creative Assembly/Feral Interactive / **82%** (Issue 16)

It Takes Two / Hazelight Studios / **81%** (Issue 51)

Wanna Survive / PINIX / **80%** (Issue 42)

The games for... HIGH-INTENSITY PLAY

Tetris Effect / *Monstars Inc./Resonair* / **90%** (Issue 4)

Sayonara Wild Hearts / *Simogo* / **89%** (Issue 25)

Chivalry 2 / *Torn Banner Studios* / **88%** (Issue 54)

Hot Wheels Unleashed / *Milestone* / **86%** (Issue 56)

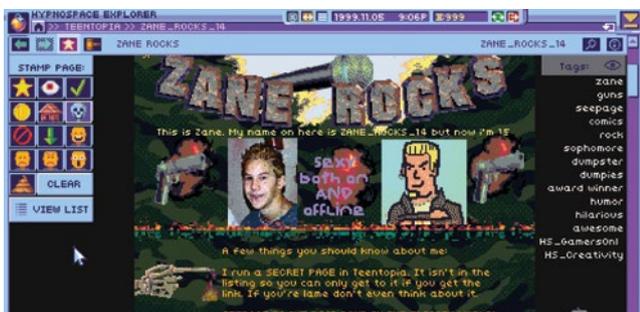**Star Wars: Squadrons** / *EA* / **86%** (Issue 45)

Devil May Cry 5 / *Capcom* / **84%** (Issue 10)

Black Bird / *Onion Games* / **84%** (Issue 3)

⊚ **BPM: Bullets Per Minute** / *Awe Interactive* / **83%** (Issue 45)

Resident Evil Village / *Capcom* / **82%** (Issue 52)

Catastronauts / *Inertia Game Studios* / **82%** (Issue 1)

The games for... CURING THE INDIE ITCH

If Found... / *DREAMFEEL* / **92%** (Issue 44)

Can Androids Pray
/ *Natalie Clayton/Priscilla Snow/Xalavier Nelson Jr.* / **90%** (Issue 21)

Tales From Off-Peak City Vol. 1 / *Cosmo D* / **89%** (Issue 39)

Baba Is You / *Hempuli Oy* / **88%** (Issue 10)

TOEM / *Something We Made* / **87%** (Issue 57)

Afterparty / *Night School Studio* / **86%** (Issue 33)

Witcheye / *Moon Kid* / **86%** (Issue 30)

⊚ **Hypnospace Outlaw**
/ *Tendershoot/Michael Lasch/ThatWhichIs Media* / **86%** (Issue 11)

Haunted PS1 Demo Disc / *The Haunted* / **85%** (Issue 39)

Chicory: A Colorful Tale / *Greg Lobanov* / **83%** (Issue 54)

PC Top 10
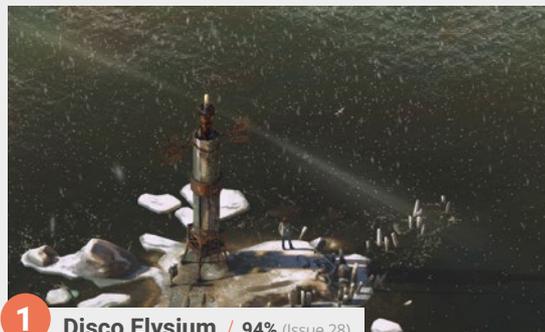
1 **Disco Elysium** / **94%** (Issue 28)

Smarter and deeper than anything else; truly
an RPG in a class completely of its own.

2 **Hades** / **94%** (Issue 44)

Proving 'roguelike' isn't a dirty word, learning-
and-dying is a joy from start to finish.

3 **Assassin's Creed Odyssey**
/ **93%** (Issue 1)

The point where Ubisoft realised over-the-top
adventures were the right direction.

4 **Telling Lies** / **92%** (Issue 24)

This FMV mystery asks more of the player
than most, with rewards to match.

5 **If Found** / **92%** (Issue 44)

A compelling and beautifully illustrated
narrative, as moving as it is memorable.

6 **Yakuza: Like a Dragon** / **90%** (Issue 45)

A bold, brash, and joyous rebirth for the
long-running gangster series.

7 **Tetris Effect** / **90%** (Issue 4)

The question is 'how do you better *Tetris*?'
The answer is: like this. This is how.

8 **Kentucky Route Zero** / **90%** (Issue 33)

Abstract style meets concrete commitments
in this fantastic magical realist adventure.

9 **Can Androids Pray** / **90%** (Issue 21)

A healthy dose of existential anxiety in a
minimalist, bite-sized package.

10 **Slipways** / **90%** (Issue 53)

A focused puzzle game masquerading as
space empire-based grand strategy.

Backwards
compatible

WRITTEN BY **RYAN LAMBIE**

Fiddlesticks

Adding an analogue stick to a retro handheld sounds like one of those "nuts and gum – together at last" ideas that's simply too ridiculous to work. Does anybody really want a Sega Game Gear with a tiny mushroom-shaped thumbstick jutting out of its shell? Would such a stick even feel appreciably better than the traditional D-pad that's graced the system since it rolled off the production line over 30 years ago? To borrow a phrase from clickbait websites: the answer, dear reader, may surprise you.

I was certainly sceptical when RetroSix (**retrosix.co.uk**) sent over its latest add-on, logically dubbed RetroSticks GG. I had a spare Game Gear lying around for testing things out on, though, so there was no reason not to at least give it a try. If you've already done the usual bits of housekeeping you need to do in order

^ The RetroSticks GG soldered in place. Those screws around the edge of the device are used for calibration.

to keep a Game Gear from dying – that is, replace all the capacitors, and maybe install a modern LCD screen – then you shouldn't have too much trouble installing the RetroSticks. The device lies directly on top of the contacts where the D-pad would typically sit, and there are six contact points where the thumbstick is soldered onto the Game Gear's motherboard.

To make calibration easier, RetroSix recommends that you turn on the RetroSticks' debug port, which you could theoretically do by bridging the two pre-tinned points next to the area marked J3. This activates a quartet of tiny LED lights on the device, which will turn off depending on which way the analogue stick points. What you'll likely find, though, is that these LEDs are eye-searingly bright. To combat this, it's advisable to solder a

resistor between those aforementioned points rather than bridge them – luckily, I had a few spare SMD resistors to hand.

With the resistor in place, I carefully inserted a cartridge and powered the Game Gear on, with the motherboard still outside its shell – all the better to get at the four tiny screws used to calibrate the analogue stick. RetroSix provides a screwdriver with each device, which is just as well, since it can take a fair bit of fiddling to get everything set up just right. You need to adjust each screw, often by tiny fractions of a turn, until the analogue stick can be moved, say, up and to the left without wrongly triggering one of the other directions. The exact amount of travel the stick needs to make before it triggers can also be adjusted in the same way. RetroSix has produced a handy

video which shows you the calibration process in far more detail than I have room to relate here – you can see that at **wfmag.cc/retrosticks**.

Once the calibration was sorted and the Game Gear was screwed back together, I tested it out on a couple of fairly common GG staples: *Sonic the Hedgehog*, and the oddly titled bat-and-ball outing, *Woody Pop*. Frankly, I wasn't expecting the stick to feel as natural or as pleasant to use as it does; it isn't true analogue, inevitably, but if you favour the tactile quality of a modern controller over the traditional D-pads of old, the RetroSticks GG is a responsive, easy-to-install option – and at £12, it isn't exactly expensive, either.

Note that it isn't necessarily the best-looking option, though: RetroSix has plans to produce a shroud that will help integrate the stick with the original shell, but I'd still be hard-pushed to say that the RetroSticks will ever look entirely at home on the Game Gear. But if you favour handling over aesthetics, then the RetroSticks lend a distinctly modern feel to an ancient bit of tech. Despite my initial scepticism, I'm definitely a convert.

Perfect Colour Engine

If you've been playing PC Engine games on anything but the original hardware, chances are the colours are wrong. Whether it's via an emulator like Mednafen, an FPGA device like MiSTer, or even an original PC Engine played through Terraonion's Super SD System 3 RGB converter, games will appear differently on screen than they would on a stock console. And while most players wouldn't necessarily notice the subtle gradient shifts in an old JRPG's sky, a group of dedicated enthusiasts have spent the past year or so trying to get a more accurate understanding of how the PC Engine renders its colour palette.

In November 2020, a major breakthrough occurred: a detailed analysis of the PC Engine's video architecture was completed, and an accurate palette was finally released online. This palette can then be put into MiSTer or an emulator, bringing it in line with the original hardware's colour output.

As Dan Mons writes at RetroRGB, the sheer effort that's gone into the project shouldn't be underestimated; to cite one example, a hacker named

One of the games used as a test case for the PC Engine's colour palette: the gradient in the sky here is rendered incorrectly.

Furrtek physically 'decapped' the components on an original PC Engine to get at the logic gates inside. "The process is both complex and dangerous (requiring special acids and solvents)," Mons writes, "and similarly photographing the literally microscopic internals to produce a useful picture is extremely difficult."

More than a mere nerdy pursuit, this quest to map the PC Engine's colour palette is a vital component in preserving the medium's history. You can read a detailed breakdown of the research at **wfmag.cc/pc-palette**.

Backwards compatible

WRITTEN BY IAN "DUKE" DRANSFIELD

A modern OG

The original Xbox turned 20 not too long ago, which is a surprising number if you don't pay close attention to the fact that time is cruel. Anyway, it's a strange one in the world of retro gaming in that… well, for one, a lot of folks have probably snapped a tendon in their neck at the shock of reading the claim the Xbox is 'retro'. But hey, what can you do? The point, though, is that the Xbox isn't hugely well served in the world of retro gaming – it feels in some ways like an also-ran, not fawned over like generational stablemates the PS2 and GameCube.

I don't know why this is. It's not like Xbox makes it easy to play *any* original Xbox game on its modern platforms, with only 56 games available through its backwards compatibility functionality on Xbox Series consoles and Xbox One. That's far fewer than were available on Xbox 360, and brings original Xbox game compatibility on the *newer* Xboxes down to a similar level

as the PS5 and PS4, with regards to PS2 games re-released on those platforms. You can't play many of them, basically.

But I don't see the cries of the internet calling out for more Xbox games. I don't see as much love for the console. I don't see as much tinkering and mucking about with the machine as I do with, say, the Dreamcast. But it is out there – there are ways of modernising an Xbox, and making

it into a (massive) machine that's capable of playing… well, *every* original Xbox game, rather than relying on the whims of modern Microsoft. In honour of the console turning 20, I figured… hey, let's go over some of them in this not-a-guide.

Regardless of any other thing you do or want to do with an Xbox you pick up these days, you're guaranteed to want to do one thing: put a newer hard drive in there. This is the only thing that's really mandatory, as it frees up the decades-old DVD drive from having to do anything beyond ripping games from disc to the drive. Because yes, fitting a new HDD in there and soft modding the console means you can indeed play games direct from the hard drive. If you can't see why that's beneficial,
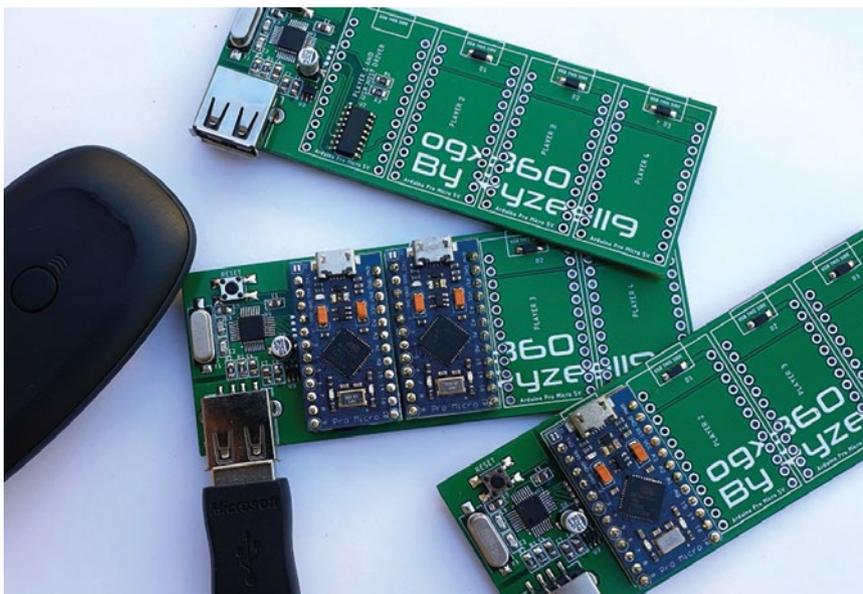
you've been ignoring consoles for the last few generations (and PCs for even longer). You can find a guide on how to do it, here: **wfmag.cc/xboxhdd**.

That mention of soft modding needs some clarification too – you have to mod your machine to make it work with the new hard drive. It's an absolute requirement. But you don't need to open it up and solder things and void your 20-year-old warranty – you can 'soft' mod it, meaning you're hacking your way through the console's security using *soft*-ware. Clever naming, innit. As well as allowing games to be played off HDD, it also unlocks some other accoutrements – emulation, music, and other things you're likely better-served for elsewhere – but you still need to do the mod. Here's another guide: **wfmag.cc/xboxsoftmod**.

So where from there? Well, now you're looking at things you *might* want to do rather than what you have to do. There's a bigger hard drive and you've ripped your discs *to* said drive. Sorted. But video signal is the bane of many a retro console player. Fortunately, the Xbox embraced the HD generation early, so there are plenty of component leads and HDMI converters out there to make it all straightforward – my personal recommendation, though,

is to either make or buy a cable that uses the Xbox 360's infinitely superior component lead and makes it compatible with the original Xbox. It's significantly cheaper than official/original Xbox solutions, and produces an image quality that is, frankly, superb. Here's a guide (or check on eBay to buy one pre-made): **wfmag.cc/xboxcomp**.

Finally, controllers. Alright, there's probably more you can do, but I'm keeping it straightforward here. There are some wireless controllers on the Xbox and they are, roundly, garbage. There are options. You can go the maker route with the OGX360 (**wfmag.cc/ogx360**), which needs some programming and soldering but is robust, well-supported, and made specifically for the original Xbox. Or you can go for the Brook Wingman XB and a USB-to-Xbox cable, which is probably simpler if we're being honest. Both allow you to use modern wireless controllers on an original Xbox, so while not *necessary* are definitely nice to have.

Anyway, happy belated birthday to the OG Xbox. I'm off to play some *Burnout 3* in celebration.

MAKE IT AGAIN XIV

Paradise might be the game everyone lives for these days, but some of us want to go back to the simpler, arcade perfection of *Burnout 3: Takedown* for our car-crashing joy. Criterion's third in the series was the point where everything came together perfectly, and – in classic 'that's really well designed' fashion – it still plays an absolute blinder to this day. Not being able to play the game on anything post-Xbox 360 is a travesty, so I'm fully expecting EA to pull its thumb out and give us a proper remaster of the best of the *Burnout*s soon enough. 'Expecting', 'hoping' – same thing, right?
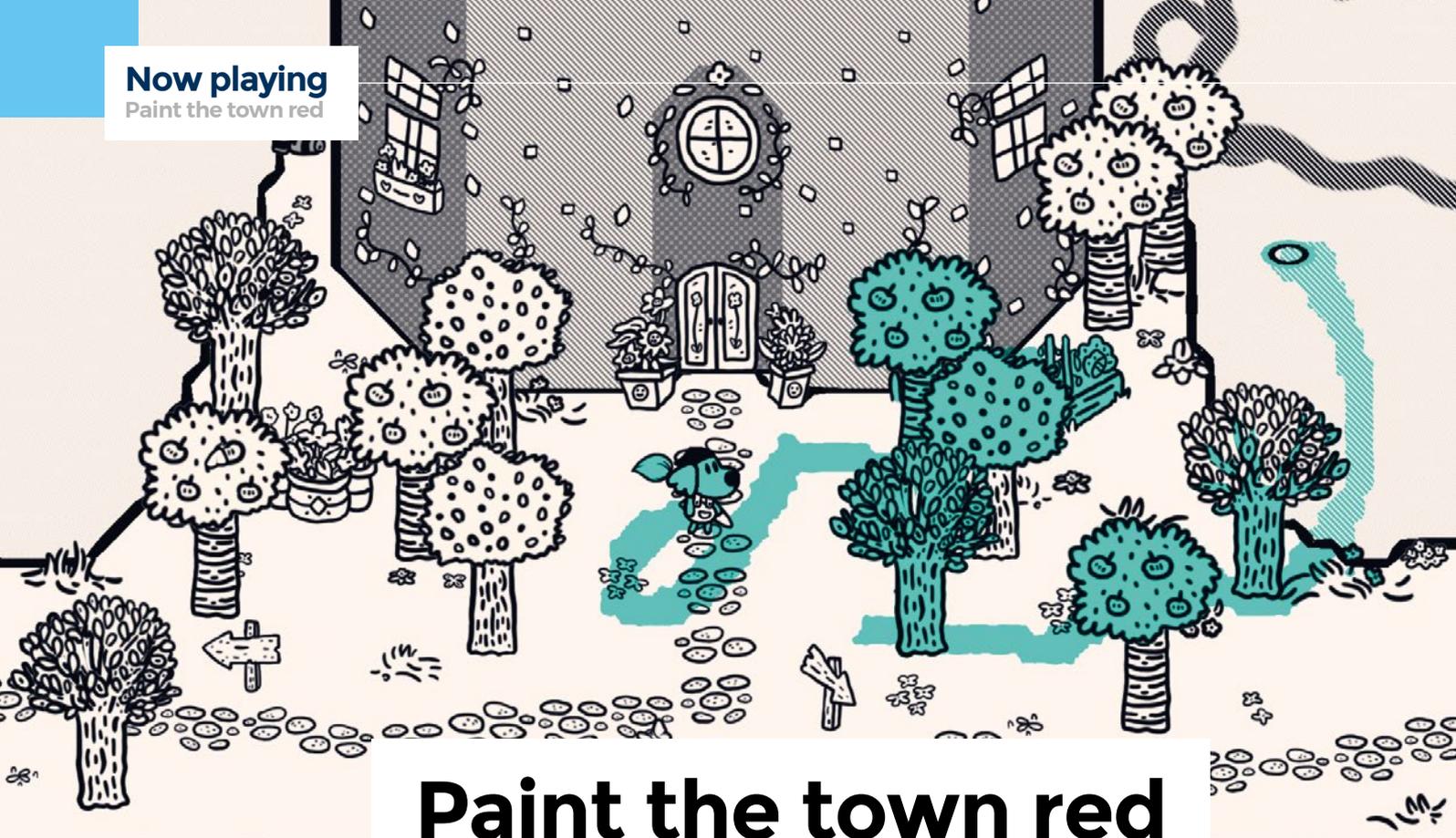
Paint the town red

This month, Ryan gets in touch with his artistic side in the charming Chicory: A Colorful Tale

D o you ever have those days where your brain needs a holiday? Where your mind feels so overstuffed with real-world troubles that you just want to project yourself somewhere less stressful? I was having one of those days recently, and so I decided to fire up *Chicory* – yet another of the many, many games on my teeteringly tall 'to-play' pile. And, as it turns out, it's offering just the break my brain needed: a gentle, soothing adventure that's both like a lot

of other games I've played, yet at the same time entirely its own thing.

Set in a hand-drawn fantasy world where all the inhabitants are animals named after foodstuffs (Cardamom, Radish, Clementine, and so forth), you're cast in the role of a lowly pup who inadvertently becomes a Wielder – the holder of an enchanted paintbrush which can transform the world around it. This is just as well, because a mysterious force has drained the entire landscape of colour, while the brush's previous Wielder, the titular Chicory, has fallen into a depressive funk. With paintbrush in hand, you set off on a quest to restore colour to the world, and in the process, discover what the dark force was that disrupted everything in the first place.

From its offbeat humour to its felt-tip graphics, *Chicory*'s an indie game to its core, yet developer Greg Lobanov has clearly taken more than a few cues from Nintendo when it comes to the game's design. The top-down world of hidden goodies and secret caves is straight out of a 2D *Zelda* title, while *Chicory*'s talkative animals and chilled atmosphere are akin to *Animal Crossing*. There are all kinds of challenges to overcome in *Chicory*, but death is a rare occurrence – it's only in the occasional boss battle, where the pace changes to a surprising degree, that the game starts to bare its teeth a little.

Otherwise, *Chicory* is mostly about the pleasure of wielding its enchanted paintbrush, and seeing what effects it has on the world. Lobanov shows real imagination in this regard: your brush can be used to uncover hidden objects, like cats loitering in trees. It can be used to change the state of plant life, so blossoming flowers will create a useful bridge across a gap, say. You'll get upgrades for your brush, too, so you can start to use it to forge a path through darkened areas, in turn opening up new sections on the map. These are all essentially twists we've seen before in adventure games: there are even globular items that explode when painted, and can be used to destroy rocky barriers – a clear nod to *Zelda*'s iconic bombs. But the way *Chicory* twists all these elements to fit its ink-and-paint world is utterly disarming; indeed, simply using your right stick to splash different coloured paints around is pleasurable all by itself, and has its own useful side effect: you'll instantly know whether or not you've visited a particular part of the map based on whether it's monochrome or daubed with colour.

Even *Chicory*'s method of holding the player's hand is deftly folded into its world. Dotted around the bucolic environment, you'll find the odd phone box now and again. Interact with it, and your canine character will phone its mother, who'll give you a hint as to what to do next. If

you still need more help, the mother will offer to put your father on the line – but, she warns, he can go into an exhausting level of detail at the best of times. It's a means of giving the player a helping hand through the game without breaking their immersion, and it's about the cleverest way of doing it I've seen in a very long time.

This one design detail sums up *Chicory* in a nutshell, really: it comes up with new riffs on established and time-honoured game mechanics, but those riffs are so thoughtfully done that you can't help but smile at their style and ingenuity. There's also a sincere tone to *Chicory* that always stays on just the right side of mawkish: it's about the wonder and also the stresses of creativity, and, more fundamentally, about simply making the world a better place. Whether it's picking up the odd bit of litter or helping out a neighbour by running an errand, kindness is the colour we can use to splash around an otherwise drab and depressing world. *Chicory*'s just the holiday my brain needed, then – one I really don't want to end for a good few hours yet. ⓦ

> **"*Chicory* is about the pleasure of wielding its enchanted brush"**

Wireframe Recommends

Kirby And The Rainbow Curse
WII U
HAL's platformer uses the Wii U's GamePad to satisfying effect, since you can physically draw platforms to guide Kirby through each level. This and *Kirby: Power Paintbrush* on the Nintendo DS are among the pink blob's most underrated titles.

Ōkamiden
NINTENDO DS
While *Okami* is the better-known game, I'd argue this handheld outing is its equal. It's a charming adventure with a look and feel all of its own – and the 'celestial brush' mechanic is deployed just as ingeniously here as it is in its bigger console brethren.

de Blob 2
PS3, WII, XBOX 360, VARIOUS
Like *Chicory*, the *de Blob* games are about traversing a world and splashing colour back into it. The 2015 sequel really polished the painting and 3D platforming concept to a shine, though, and it's well worth checking out its 2018 port to the Nintendo Switch.

Life and Solus

Ian's starting to feel the grind with Mass Effect 2

T he revisit to the remasters continued this month; after finishing the first of the trilogy, I swiftly moved on to *Mass Effect 2* – the middle one in the *Mass Effect Legendary Edition*. It's my favourite of the series, the point where that mix between old-school computer RPG sensibilities melded perfectly with more modern mechanical conveniences – like being able to shoot where you pointed your gun; wild, I know. And it was

Patriarch: But perhaps Aria's reputation is no longer my concern. Perhaps I will stay, and see who thinks me important enough to kill.

before EA got *too much* into things, as it did with the third game, slotting in loot boxes a long time before the public (and media) realised these were tools to get us all addicted to gambling. *Mass Effect 2* was the finest balance, and a superb game.

Weirdly, it's been dragging this month. I've played it through four or five times since its 2010 launch and never felt quite like this before. Maybe we can blame the pandemic, as we do with everything, but it's not feeling quite as magical as it always has previously. The obvious culprit, being less facetious, is that I *just* got off playing the original (remastered) game and it had a fair chunk of work done to it – it actually felt like something vaguely new, rather than an old game with a new coat of paint. Combat was playable and not, y'know, rubbish. The Mako handled *slightly* better. It was the same thing, but different e*nough*. *Mass Effect 2* in the *Legendary Edition* feels like *Mass Effect 2* in a new coat.

That feeling of it being something new-ish – something special, sort-of – has been lost for the second game and so, as a result, there's an inevitable feeling of being let down about it all. It's daft, I know, and it's already passing, but from the experience I think it's fair to warn you, dear reader, against the tyranny of jumping straight
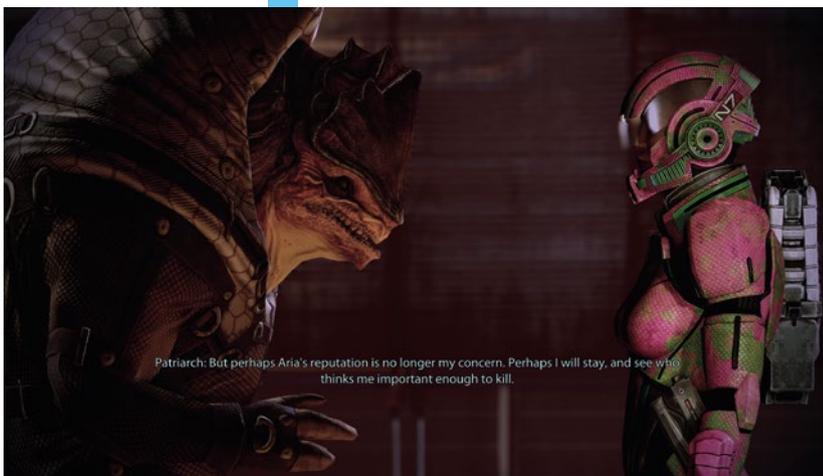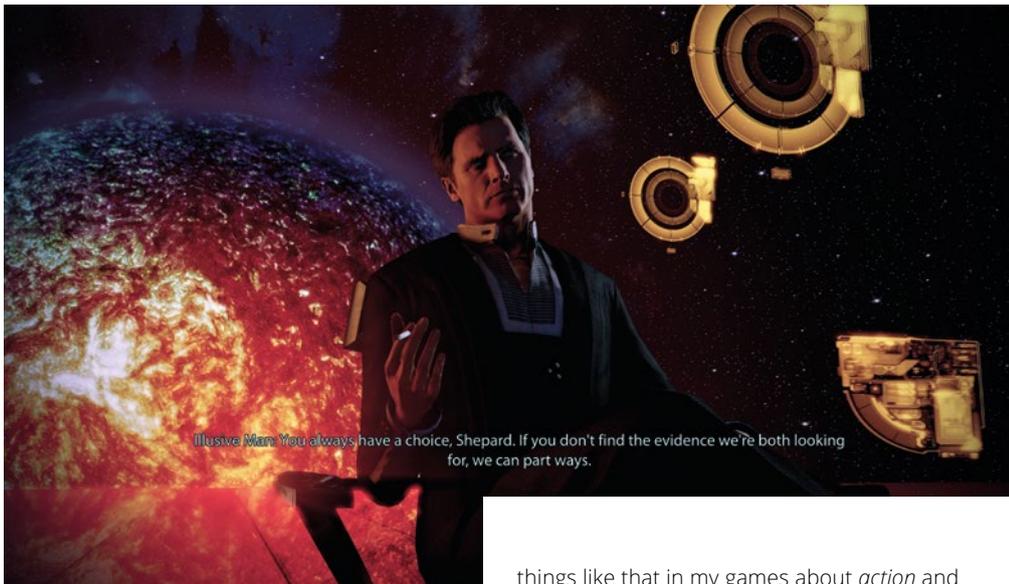
Illusive Man: You always have a choice, Shepard. If you don't find the evidence we're both looking for, we can part ways.

from *Mass Effect* to its sequel when you're playing the 2021 re-releases. It'll mess with your mind.

Anyway, there's a game beyond my clouded feelings, and that's what I've actually been playing. Fortunately, in a world where emotions don't matter, *Mass Effect 2* is still as superb, still as special as it ever was. The story it tells feels like it has little to do with the overarching narrative of the trilogy, but that works to its benefit as it's able to tell an A-to-B tale without leaving much of anything as a loose thread – from that core narrative, at least. The game features one of life's best intro sequences, with our hero of the first game Commander Shepard being killed by unknown aliens, having heroically sacrificed herself to make sure the crew survives. She gets better, though. And from there, a new tale begins.

It's that snappy pacing: there's a threat, you need to deal with it, assemble your team, and go. That's your mission. There's plenty – dozens of hours of stuff – to do in-between, of course, and while the Mako has gone the way of the dodo in *ME2*, there is a scanning minigame that I'm not ashamed to say I actually really enjoy. It's as prosaic as they come: you're just swooping a scanning reticule over a planet to find things to mine and distress beacons to ping. It is in no way actually good and positive an addition to the formula, and is rightly mocked by plenty of folks out there. I love it, and will happily sit there scanning dozens of planets for a handful of hours at a time, because I need

"The Mako has gone the way of the dodo in *ME2*"

things like that in my games about *action* and *shooting* and *drama* and *stakes*. See also: the *Pipe Mania* puzzles in *BioShock*.

Away from the scanning (when I can pull myself away from it, at least), I'm finding it slow going compared to my manic dash through the first game. But progress is being made. The upgrade from the original version might not feel as impactful as it did for *Mass Effect* (and honestly, even there it wasn't a very big upgrade outside of textures and loading times), so there's not that feeling of new newness to the old game. But *Mass Effect 2* is a bona fide classic of the western RPG genre, and strong writing, great characters, and genuine risks still come together to make for one of the most compelling games of the modern era. Or any era, really.

Whereas last month I had all but finished *Mass Effect* by the time that column was written, this month, I'm barely a quarter of the way into things. Perhaps the odds of hitting the entire trilogy through three issues of this fine publication, in a row, is an unknowable dream. Fatigue is real. Shiny 4K textures only go so far. But we'll always have Mordin Solus. ⓦ

Ninja Gaiden

Later games refined it, but Tecmo's action–platformer first popularised the physical freedom of the wall jump

TECMO / **1988** / **NES**

Ninjas were well and truly in the cultural zeitgeist by the late 1980s, but it took Tecmo's game to truly capture the feel of controlling a fleet-footed shadow warrior. Sega's *Shinobi* came out one year before *Ninja Gaiden*, but its shuriken-lobbing action felt far more measured than Tecmo's offering. Where *Shinobi*'s Joe Musashi plodded through levels and hopped up on the occasional high platform, *Ninja Gaiden*'s Ryu Hayabusa sped along with the devil at his heels, barely pausing to slash away at enemies as he went. The wall jump was all part of Ryu's nimble moveset: with it, he could leap up to a street sign, cling to it, then fling himself onto a platform opposite.

Admittedly, the origins of certain game mechanics can be difficult to pin down. Even with the wonder that is the internet, it's hard to say definitively whether Tecmo really did invent the wall jump, or wall cling, with its seminal *Ninja Gaiden* in 1988. But if some earlier more obscure game came up with the mechanic first, then it's at least true that Tecmo succeeded in bringing the wall jump to the masses.

For the time, the wall jump was a thrilling thing to see in a platformer. Earlier titles like *Donkey Kong* and *Super Mario Bros.* may have refined the genre's jumping mechanics, but

the sense of speed and athleticism *Ninja Gaiden* introduced was pretty much unparalleled. Allied to some deftly programmed controls, *Ninja Gaiden*'s wall jump was all part of Tecmo's goal of creating an action game with a cinematic sense of drama and movement.

In the years since its release, much has been written about *Ninja Gaiden*'s eye-watering difficulty level, and Ryu Hayabusa's freedom of movement plays an important role here, too. *Ninja Gaiden* is the kind of game that will kill you in a heartbeat, but the range and precision of the controls means those deaths seldom feel unfair. Cheap at times, certainly, but not entirely unavoidable.

Looking back, it's impressive just how quickly the wall jump evolved from its late-eighties roots. Just one year after *Ninja Gaiden*, along came Capcom with *Strider*, in which its futuristic hero could cling and jump from wall to wall with such floaty abandon, it almost felt as though he was cartwheeling through each encounter.

The Master System version of *Ninja Gaiden*, released in 1992 – a standalone game programmed by SIMS rather than Tecmo – is also worth noting for subtly advancing the original game's wall run. In it, Ryu Hayabusa could leap from one wall to the next more rapidly – a move which allowed him to easily

> **"The sense of speed and athleticism *Ninja Gaiden* introduced was pretty much unparalleled"**

scale his way out of, say, a narrow well created by two stacks of crates.

From the late 1990s onwards, the wall jump moved into the 3D realm. It became a part of a certain Italian plumber's skillset in *Super Mario 64* and just about every game in the series thereafter, and from that point on, most action games contained a riff on the move, whether it was cutesy fare like *Ratchet & Clank* or grittier outings like *Mirror's Edge* or, of course, Tecmo's own *Ninja Gaiden* series of 3D games which started to appear in 2004. It could also be argued that the wall run, a gravity-defying trick seen in the likes of *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* and *Titanfall*, is an evolution of the wall jump.

It all feeds into what *Demon Turf* developer Fabian Rastorfer described in our issue 53 interview as "expression through the act of simple movement". Today, most gamers are familiar with the concept of being presented with an obstacle course of platforms, pits, and hazards, and then being given an arsenal of moves they can use to traverse it. The level designs may be set in stone, but how the player chains their double jumps, wall clings, and other moves together is what creates the intoxicating sense of freedom and self-expression. All of that arguably began, in nascent form, in Tecmo's masterful *Ninja Gaiden*. Ⓦ

The other Ninja Gaiden

The NES version of *Ninja Gaiden* is the game that gets all the attention these days, but it wasn't the only game Tecmo released under that name in 1988. Developed at the same time as the NES classic, the *Ninja Gaiden* arcade game is an altogether different beast: a coin-munching action game that emphasises kicking villains through phone boxes over nimble platforming. Its bigger, bulkier Ryu Hayabusa is still an athletic sort, though, and capable of somersaulting over cars and clambering along drainpipes. The NES version's iconic wall jump, though? Nowhere to be found.

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